

THE FIRST DANIELLE: LETTERS TO A SUICIDAL FRIEND

By Damien Tavis Toman

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

The correspondences contained in this little volume represent the assembled and selected work of four years, between 2012 and 2017, with nothing being written in 2016. Danielle, a woman whom I met simultaneously to meeting my second wife, Dorothy, began writing to me mysteriously after a silence of nearly a decade, presumably assuming (as others have before her) that I was the only “safe” person to consult regarding her despairing and increasingly suicidal feelings. I refer to her as the “first” Danielle because there were two persons of that name with whom I was at different times in love, and both were in some measure suicidal. I have written on the second Danielle, but declined publication so far out of deference to the subject, to whom around half of the poems in my *Winter Devotions* are in any case dedicated.

Though obviously not composed according to any intentional scheme, it may be said that this volume is divided into and concerned principally with three divisions of inquiry. The first is *love*; the second, *meaning*; the third (and most important), *death*. As is true of my other writings, nothing here is intended to be reassuring or redemptive, either of the author, the recipient, or humanity as a whole. It is expected that suicide, for the most part, be condemned and discouraged in the interests of the weak-willed and despondent, but this I do not do. Nor do I endorse suicide for anyone but myself. The underlying irony of this entire work is that it is

pointless and paradoxical to ask anyone else's advice on suicide, which is the world's most solitary and subjective act.

Let it be noted that at the hour of this writing, Danielle is still alive and has gotten her dog back.

-DTT

Wappingers Falls, New York

October 2017

THE FIRST DANIELLE

Dear Danielle,

I'm astonished - and extremely glad - to hear from you after all this time. I have frequently wondered what became of you. That you ended up in law school comes as quite a surprise, considering your preference (as I recall) for the sciences; but I have no doubt that you're succeeding out of hand. I hope you find the study rewarding.

Dorothy and I have been divorced for nearly five years now, having separated in the winter of 2007. The divorce (and, indeed, the marriage itself) was and remains the great tragedy of my life: one from which I must frankly confess that I have yet to entirely recover, and to which I have not yet altogether reconciled myself. She and I have had no contact since the separation. I

suppose that I must stand with you, then, in confessing that "I've never found lasting love;" but unlike you, I am no longer particularly hopeful that such a thing is possible--in this world, at least. Perhaps it is better said that love lasts, though the lovers themselves may part. And no two persons, however "in love" they may be, ever love each other equally.

I have, in the time since we last spoke (I can't even recall the year), taken two bachelor's degrees, but have made use of neither. I am still debating with myself over the course of my academic career, uncertain even of which subject to pursue, or how far to pursue it. For the moment, I am working at a hotel as I have always done, and bunking at the apartment of a friend who doubles as a de facto lover. I have another girlfriend as well, but we pay each other little attention.

It's awfully good to hear from you, Danielle. You have been in my thoughts with some regularity since our last parting. Never hesitate to write whenever the inclination finds you.

Affectionately yours,

-Damien

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Danielle,

We have always been united by our persistent misfortune, especially in the realm of relationships. For your part, I'm sure you're quite blameless; you always seemed to me to have the purest, if least decisive, of hearts. Not I. I quite intentionally made a scandal-ridden fiasco of my marriage to Dorothy, and my conduct following its dissolution has been far from redemptive. I calculate that I have been in five relationships since the separation, and in each of them, despite possessing only the noblest of intentions, I have proved myself a scoundrel. I wonder sometimes, even as I look into the eyes of whomever I am presently attached to, whether I have lost the ability to love.

The incident to which you have alluded is one that I might have forgotten utterly, had you not recalled it to mind. The young woman in question was named Lorelei, and it was only the beginning of an affair that would last intermittently until the end of my marriage and some years thereafter. I was, in fact, engaged to be married to her; but I called the wedding off after most of the arrangements had already been made, being momentarily convinced that I had fallen in love with another woman¹. That was a year ago, and my life has (as divine justice would have it) been steadily and unremittingly unraveling ever since. I have experienced dejection, failure, and disgrace on a scale that would render one of Theo. Dreiser's characters comical by comparison. I say this not out of self-pity, but out of a desire to help you see that, however poor your choices in life may appear to you, there is another whose choices have been more cataclysmic still. Yet here we both are, cracked but not shattered, with a fondly held friendship that years of silence have not extinguished. The perverse logic of an otherwise incomprehensible odyssey.

¹ This was the "second Danielle," a story for another time.

I do hope that you are sincere about calling me. It would be an undreamt-of joy to hear your voice again.

Yours,

-Damien

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Danielle,

As comfortless an observation as this may be, the question seems less whether either of us will be "alone forever," than whether either of us will end up *alone in the end*. Granted, we are still somewhat young to be pondering such potentialities, but having already scorched my way through a number of relationships which I had conceived of as "permanent," and not having cause to entirely abandon the expectation of future love in some form of another, my greatest worry is not that I will be alone for the rest of my life; rather, it is that I shall never find a love that will sustain me until the day I die--or, at least, until the union is severed on either end by a timely and natural death. I have no doubt that I can go on sporadically indulging in the pleasures (and torments) of incidental love-affairs and semi-serious, though transitory, romantic engagements. As long as I continue to possess the modest powers of attraction that have carried me this far, unremitting loneliness is hardly an inevitability. Yet I am more afraid of continuing

to suffer through an interminable sequence of ephemeral attachments, than I am of spending the rest of my life in a state of self-imposed celibacy. Call it fantasy, but I want a love that time cannot exhaust. What shall I do, then, if my heart is already exhausted from the pursuit of it?

You have good cause to wonder after my "tendency to keep looking" even after it seems that I have found someone who loves me. I certainly don't consider myself so extraordinarily lovable that I deserve the love of a multitude, and should scoff at the privilege of being truly loved by a mere individual. I have no particular hankering for variety; rather, I often find that my attraction to a woman increases the longer I am with her. So why do I go on seeking? Why, once I have come safely to port, do I hurl myself overboard and plunge after the flotsam? I suppose it is because I am an innately mythical thinker. While an over-generous fate grants me one suffering Penelope after another, it seems I will never be content until I've gained the enchantments of the unknowable Circe upon whose rocks I am incessantly endeavoring to be shipwrecked. There is no more ideal woman in reality or fiction than Morticia Addams of *The Addams Family*. Even for her husband, Gomez, she is as much a specter as she is flesh-and-blood. She is aloof, inscrutable, almost incorporeal--therefore boundlessly desirable. But she is his alone, and she never sees the need to leave the house. I--a very Gomez for my indefatigable romantic zeal--am forever searching for a woman who is half witch, half ghost, and all mine.

My nominal girlfriend and I have just "officially" broken up--by text-message, if you will believe it. From the outset of our approximately two month-long association--which was, despite everything, not lacking in moments of great joy and tenderness--neither of us could draw

a satisfactory conclusion regarding what we expected of the other, nor what the other expected of us. It was a liaison spent in limbo; I felt always as if I was attempting to shackle a Will o' the Wisp, while we found in each other's eyes nothing but bottomless interrogations and aching wells of doubt. She is twenty-two years old and aspiring to a career as a pop-singer. I am a thirty year-old serial divorcee with nothing behind me but infamy and nothing ahead of me but dread. She admitted that she didn't know what she wanted. I thought that I knew what I wanted, but I could never have presumed to ask it of her. At last a mortifying circumstance arose which, had it not been expediently and rather crudely disposed of, would have bound us together indefinitely. It was, as they say, all too real. When it was done, we could scarcely find it within ourselves to speak to each other. My sense of guilt was fathomless--as if I had committed an abomination upon some priceless celestial artifact. Yet, in the end, it was *she* who expressed the hope that we might try the relationship again when she felt that she could "give me what I needed." Such a pitiful sentiment from so magnificent a creature!

If the break-up was any sort of blow to me, it was so soft as to go nearly unnoticed. My new roommate and I have been conducting ourselves more or less conubially since I took residence with her, there being only one bed to sleep in, and so I have felt no dearth of companionship. But, as so often seems to be the case, her feelings for me appear to be far deeper and stronger than mine for her, and I am haunted by the familiar sense that I am play-acting for the sake of convenience. I am merely reverting to my trademark performance as a privately tormented domestic dreamboat, while she hangs on for all it's worth, mournfully anticipating the heartbreak that must come at the moment of awakening. I would do anything, anything to be able to

actually love her. But I know I'm not worthy of her, and I'll be scourged and harried by that knowledge until I find someone new to debase myself with.

It's Friday and you've yet to call. I'll be elated to hear from you, whenever you have the time.

Yours,

-Damien

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Under ideal conditions, with all things aligning more or less as they should, a compatible marriage can surely mean the difference between a happy life and a comparatively unhappy one. I doubt that thousands of years of evidence in this regard is very much worth disputing. But my own experience must not, on that account, be wholly discredited, and I must confess with all candor that two marriages and several so-called "committed" relationships besides have never made me any more contented, serene, or fulfilled in life. Though circumstances have conspired against my ever remaining alone for long, my innate sense of melancholy, listlessness, and despondency was to no degree assuaged or mollified by any manner of companionship, however congenial. This is why I say that we are the same miserable creatures whether anyone condescends to love us or not. Our discontent is born with us, it seems, and we must suffer with it until the end. We must also endeavor to understand it, and, despite the grief that it brings us, to appreciate the unique place it affords us within the human puzzle. The normal are not to be

envied, nor are the happy, the fortunate, the successful, the oblivious--impossible though it may seem not to envy them. If we had everything that they had, our discontent would still be with us, and would render it all worthless. What we feel to be the void within us--the abyss we would try to plug or conceal with love or accomplishments--is, alas, our greatest treasure: it is the thing that will lead us to God. I am speaking more metaphysically here than religiously. Our suffering is our blessing; we suffer because we are blessed. Like a death that never stops dying, it is this void--this blessing--which constitutes our deepest being, which can never be translated, transmitted, or conferred. It longs to be spoken, but it manifests as silence. It longs to be seen, but it shows itself as nothing. It longs to be given, but it makes itself a vacuum.

Writing this now, I feel myself to be the loneliest and the saddest of men, though I have a home and a woman who waits for me there, whom I know loves me and for whose happiness I toil day and night. I'm not satisfied. I'm tired of life; I can think of nothing worth doing, nothing worth looking forward to. I could fall in love again and again and again, but it would always lead to the same place: loneliness and the anguish of knowing that the one loves me can make me no less lonely. And I will devour us both with my loneliness.

Don't place your trust or your hopes in your therapist. Though she represents normality and relief from your dysfunctions, she is really nothing but an officer of the Law, there to beat you into quietude or lock you away so that others can't see your sadness. I've been to countless therapists; I've been tossed into mental wards four or five times, with nothing to show for it now

but my bankruptcy and an unshakable contempt for police, medics, and social workers. They exist for no reason but to get you out of the way.

Suicidal is the only sane thing to be in this world. I'm not advocating despair, precisely, but I am trying to show you that there is nothing shameful about feeling out-of-step, disillusioned, left behind. You have always known that nothing the world told you that you should want could actually make you happy, though you have tried to believe that it would--to force your desires into compliance with the prevailing social standard. Everything the world gives is the world's to take away; it can never be yours and it can never be permanent. That's the unspeakable, forbidden reality that everyone fears and tries to hide beneath teetering heaps of possessions, achievements, and ignominious loves. You can see this for yourself, and no amount of self-conditioning will ever return you to a state of ignorance. You can never gain anything until you are willing to accept that there is nothing worth gaining, and everything is free.

-Damien

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I know what it is to weep--to wake from a dream of your lost love and weep at the arrival of consciousness; to weep in the middle of the day while stirring a bowl of soup you know you can't eat; to weep so long and so hard that it seems you're weeping merely from the exhaustion of weeping. The things we love come to us so graciously, so miraculously, and then abandon us by

a clear and traceable course that no degree of foresight or attempts at obviation can alter in the end. Devastated as we are by the tragedies that come unexpectedly, we are more devastated still by those that we knew were inevitable.

There is something--indeed, there is much--to be said for the alleviation of what you call "extrinsic loneliness." But how inexpressible is the horror when you awaken to the realization that you have grown dependent upon someone who you don't really love--whom you have never and could never love--whom you may even despise, if you allowed yourself to reflect on it! This is what happens to me time after time, year after year. My body grows attached to people for whom I feel no uncommon degree of love, who inspire in me no passion, the sound of whose voices and the physical touch of whom cause me to flinch and retreat into sullen and half-deranged reveries of death, or release by any means. What is the greater torment, feigned love or genuine loneliness? What a privilege it must be to have a choice.

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Have I loved? I wonder how I should answer that. I have been "in love" numerous times, and I have given "love" and received "love" from numerous others, albeit never (or exceedingly rarely) those with whom I was "in love." I have experienced many degrees of "love;" I have expressed it and seen it expressed in a multitude of ways, for a multitude of reasons, both noble and ignoble, pure and impure. I have learned that love is only pure as long as it is hidden. The moment it reveals itself, it is tarnished, and can only grow duller with time.

I think often about renouncing the one who presently loves me and resuming my search for the Ideal. It is, undoubtedly, a base and unworthy consideration. I have no true cause for discontentment--only that, as is always the case, she loves me more than I love her. At least I suspect she does. Perhaps it is that we are both too weary and woebegone to suffer another upheaval, to take another risk.

It has been two years since anyone has made me happy--has caused me to feel as if the clouds were beginning to part above me, as if I could breathe again.² The sensation lasted perhaps a week, before adverse forces intervened, and she was taken away forever. Everyone is lonely now; everyone is damned to the outer darkness. She wrote to me not long ago of killing herself. What could I say? In a fair world, we would be killing ourselves together.

In a fair world, we'd have died long ago.

#

My daughter is twelve now--a star student, wins all the awards at school, but increasingly a mystery to me. She seems incomprehensibly determined to hang on to her childhood. She shows no interest in music, fashion, literature... no interest in anything, really, except ridiculous and insultingly stupid videos she finds on YouTube and stuffed animals to whom she gives

² This, again, was the "second Danielle."

names like "Polly Wackadoodle." Her mother, my first wife, is about to have a fourth child with a fourth father. Haley, being the oldest, will have a lot of responsibilities in regards to this new addition to the household, and perhaps she's savoring her last moments of delirious infantilism while she can. It's strange how people complain that children grow up too quickly. I'm worried that my daughter isn't growing up fast enough.

So, you feel you can't succeed in life because your metabolism causes you to sleep too late into the morning? For all I know, it's true. I used to be a "morning person"--waking up at sunrise and doing my best work before anyone else (my wife and child, when I was married) was out of bed. Most of my life though, and even now, I've had jobs that require me to work overnight hours, which is how my drinking problem really began. Working all night and going to school during the day, it became necessary for me to sedate myself for a few hours at a time, so that I could accustom my body to accepting only three to four hours of sleep, in broad daylight, when most persons require eight to ten. At my height--just before Dot left me--I was working three jobs, taking eighteen credits at college, and sleeping for two hours a day. It still wasn't enough for her; she thought of me as lazy and ineffectual, so she started sleeping with several of the amateur actors in the play she was directing, and then filed for divorce on the grounds that I had been unfaithful somehow. It didn't take me long to realize that the only thing I could rely on in the world was alcohol and the blank, dreamless slumber that it would eventually bring.

Six years passes. It's 10:00 a.m., and I'm just finishing my fourth beer of the morning: a special brew, eight per cent alcohol, that tastes like industrial runoff but gives me a buzz that normal

beer can't. I had last night off, and I slept for several hours, but my body is convinced that daytime is for sleeping, so I'm following my habitual routine of drinking myself into a somatic delirium, as if I had just come home from work. While waiting for the alcohol to take effect, I read. One book after another, classic novels, poetry, philosophy, sociology, psychology, theology--then I sink into a brief and nauseous oblivion while listening to one of the thirty albums I've recorded over the last eight years, in a solipsistic effort to remind myself that I once was capable of creating things.

I wonder where all these emails from me to you are going. You never realized, it seems, that the only reason I took up relations with Dot was because I could never succeed in adequately conveying how enamored I was of you. I loved you passionately--longed for you and dreamed of you--and you never took the slightest notice, scarcely conceding to hold my hand as we sat together on the pier at Saugerties Point Beach. Even when marriage between Dot and me seemed inevitable, I endeavored to throw a line out to you: taking your hand beneath the table, as if to say, *all can be corrected, if only you could believe that I love you, and trust that I know you as no one else can*. From the day I first met you, I knew we were the same. Our isolation, our despair, our knowledge of our irreparable separateness from the world and its sanguine demands. Yet here we are, writing to each other of the contemptible commoners who broke our respective hearts.

We have been denying ourselves for too long. Your sadness will always bring you back to me, and my sadness will always bring me back to you. We can be sad together or we can die alone.

Do you believe, Danielle? Clap your hands and pinch yourself and tell me you believe. I've waited all my life for somebody who believes in me.

#

You should know very well by now that I feel exactly the same way as you, that "nothing worked out for me." I began to think the other day about all the people I knew--all the people who seemed to regard me as some kind of friend--from those with whom I hold frequent discourse, to those, like you, whose lives remain largely on the periphery of my own. Numbering them in my mind (there were not very many), it became clear to me that we formed, altogether, a coterie of failures--fuck-ups--persons who had, by no particularly direct or obvious means, managed to elude success in every form. In a word, *losers*.

You must also know that I do not hold company with imbeciles; as a rule, all of my friends--including you--are of a higher grade of intelligence than the common person. Higher, that is, than the kind of person who tends to enjoy life and do well at things; the kind that is always being rewarded for not thinking.

It came to me, as I sat there weeping silently, that I should create a support group for us--a sort of "Losers Anonymous"--in which we could see that, however useless we may be to the rest of society, we still have a chance of being of some use to each other. I could have a chapter here in

New York. You can start your own in California. I will supply you with the necessary materials when I have myself conceived of them.

All I have ever wanted was to be of use to you, Danielle. Why won't you let me?

#

People think that I'm exaggerating--trying to impress them somehow--when I say that I think very seriously every day, more than once, about how best to kill myself. But I'm not exaggerating, and I don't think it's impressive. I not only think about killing myself every day; I make viable plans, complete in every detail. It would be dishonest of me to claim that I ever think very deeply about anything else--which is perhaps what makes people consider my thinking "unique" or "idiosyncratic." Everything comes back not simply to my own death, but how I personally intend to make my own death happen. I cannot conceive of dying any other way.

What stops me, of course, is the responsibility I feel towards my daughter; and, to a less commanding degree, my responsibility toward my own legacy. I know that this is of little help to you, since you don't have any children, and I'm sure you don't believe yourself to have--nor do you plan on having--any kind of artistic or intellectual legacy, per se. You are still living in the hope that life--the physical, emotional, and material substance of your terrestrial being--will improve; that "things will get better." In the language of Heidegger, your sense of

incompleteness and ennui comes from this "being-toward-life," which is of course impossible to maintain, because necessarily impermanent, rather than "being-toward-death," which is, so to speak, the only "authentic" way to be. Life never changes. You will only increase your misery by expecting anything from it at all--by wondering why it must be this way instead of some other way--by assuming that anybody else's life is different or better than your own. No life is any different than any other life. What makes us individuals is our relationship to death.

You must ask yourself what death really means to you, and then you must ask yourself what your death will mean to those who love you. If in either case death remains without true meaning, or is in danger of being given a meaning which you did not intend, then it is likely that your death is not yet fully yours, and you would be at least a little remiss in effecting it prematurely. That is not to say that your death is not always yours, or that you are not always death's; merely that it is conceivably possible to tarnish death's value in the eyes of the living by snatching at it too hastily--like a dog who takes no time to taste what he is gobbling down. What I am saying, in essence, is that the unexamined death is not worth dying.

Of course, you would have no trouble finding someone to give you one diagnosis or another, and who would be all too happy to medicate you heavily. And if you don't like your diagnosis, hell, I can give you one of mine. I'm not using any of them. That you are "reluctant to go down the medicine path" is, in my opinion, a good thing. It is natural for an intelligent and sensitive person to be depressed in this society--hopeless, even. I firmly believe that the true source of your anguish is that you will not admit that the world can provide you with nothing you actually

want, and that you are unwilling to amputate that portion of yourself which prohibits you from being satisfied with worldly things. The world wants your soul, and you refuse to relinquish it. However scintillating are society's promises of love and success and contentment, you know them to be empty, though the alternative you seek is long in coming, and terrible to contemplate.

Instead of asking, "Why me," perhaps you should be asking, "*What now?*"

#

Danielle,

I'm already filing for bankruptcy, so at least I've got the jump on you in that sense. It's been an unbelievable ordeal just trying to figure out all the different hospitals, ambulance companies, billing agencies and debt collectors I owe money too, and my precipitate decision to hire the first lawyer I could--an unctuous, money-grubbing cretin, as it turns out--is making things no better. He won't make the filing until I've paid him in full, and meanwhile the various actions brought against me by creditors could go into judgment at any moment, effectively destroying my chances of surviving.

I'm miserable in my relationship. I have no reason to be, but I am. I'm not attracted to the woman I'm with, and after a year of sharing her company, I find her personality increasingly exasperating. But she likes my daughter, and my daughter likes her, and she treats me fairly

well, and shows me a lot of affection, and she helped me when I had nowhere else to turn... So here I am, reliving essentially the same scenario that got me into Dot's clutches in the first place. I have no right to complain. I have no right to be unhappy. But, God help me, I am, and I always will be.

I'm a disgusting alcoholic. I drink a full case of the cheapest beer available every day--three to six beers in the morning, three to six beers at night. I never stop drinking but I never get drunk; I just fall asleep, wake up, and drink some more. Surely my body is failing me. I can't understand why I still look as young as I do, or why my brain still functions as well as it does, or how I've managed to stay relatively thin. I've destroyed myself internally and I have no intention of stopping.

It's extremely impressive that you made it all the way through law school, even though you had no idea why you were there. It sounds as if all you have to do is pass the bar exam, and you're on your way to Easy Street. Why not just do it? Get a desk job somewhere, filling out legal forms; there's no need for you ever to set foot in front of a jury. Marry another lawyer, buy a three million-dollar condo, get a shih tzu and a housekeeper named Dolores to clean up after it. What's stopping you? You're so close to having the life that everybody wants--closer than I'll ever be. It baffles me that you don't see it.

I know the depression holds you back. I know how hard it is not to break down in the middle of everything and proclaim it all hopeless and meaningless and empty. All of the debt I now have,

other than my student loans, is from suicide attempts or actions interpreted as suicide attempts. I'm supposedly "back on track" now--working, teaching, going to graduate school, etc.--but even if everything goes perfectly from now on, I can't envision a future that's actually worth living for. I'm existing for the sake of the people who would never forgive me for killing myself, and I'm not even sure why. They don't need me to keep on living, if living is what they want to do.

But I know the way you feel--just wanting somebody to love you. For some reason, completely beyond my capacity to understand or explain, that's all I've ever wanted too, and yet, I've never been satisfied when I had it. I always seem to want somebody *else* to love me; somebody other than the person who happens to be loving me at present. I've prayed and pleaded and lashed myself bloody, simply trying to be content with the love that I already have--or, that failing, to be content with no love at all: to at least be allowed to live and die alone, with nothing to distract me from this nameless work that I'm supposed to be doing--this supreme evangelistic task to which I am never called, for which I become less and less worthy with every succeeding year. I want to be a monk, or a hermit, or a rootless itinerant. I never want to think about love again.

Have you ever considered taking the veil?

#

I feel the same way that you do about everything. My academic work seems aimless, I lost my night job a while ago and am reduced to working a few hours a week in the tutoring center for

minimum wage, all of my loans have to be poured into paying lawyers to get me out of a potential felony drunk-driving conviction (even though I was arrested while neither drunk nor driving), teaching offers none of its former satisfaction, my daughter's attitude toward me is distant and inscrutable, and my love-life consists of Netflix and two cats on an unmade bed.

I hate everything. I feel paralyzed. Even killing myself seems too pointless to bother with. But what else is there? Waiting around for things to get even worse? It isn't rational.

The world was made for other people.

###

I hope not to go on for the next 40 years at all; but if I must, I would be only too glad to spend them in a "numb state." The trouble is that I can't numb myself to the senseless anguish of being, or to the terror of being dragged onward into a future of griefs and torments and failures unimagined. Life is upside down for me. It is made up entirely of all the things I *don't* want to do.

The following passage from Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener" serves, to some extent, as a summary of my condition:

Going up stairs to my old haunt, there was Bartleby silently sitting upon the banister at the landing.

“What are you doing here, Bartleby?” said I.

“Sitting upon the banister,” he mildly replied.

I motioned him into the lawyer’s room, who then left us.

“Bartleby,” said I, “are you aware that you are the cause of great tribulation to me, by persisting in occupying the entry after being dismissed from the office?”

No answer.

“Now one of two things must take place. Either you must do something, or something must be done to you. Now what sort of business would you like to engage in? Would you like to re-engage in copying for some one?”

“No; I would prefer not to make any change.”

“Would you like a clerkship in a dry-goods store?”

“There is too much confinement about that. No, I would not like a clerkship; but I am not particular.”

“Too much confinement,” I cried, “why you keep yourself confined all the time!”

“I would prefer not to take a clerkship,” he rejoined, as if to settle that little item at once.

“How would a bar-tender’s business suit you? There is no trying of the eyesight in that.”

“I would not like it at all; though, as I said before, I am not particular.”

His unwonted wordiness inspirited me. I returned to the charge.

“Well then, would you like to travel through the country collecting bills for the merchants? That would improve your health.”

“No, I would prefer to be doing something else.”

“How then would going as a companion to Europe, to entertain some young gentleman with your conversation,—how would that suit you?”

“Not at all. It does not strike me that there is any thing definite about that. I like to be stationary. But I am not particular.”

“Stationary you shall be then,” I cried, now losing all patience, and for the first time in all my exasperating connection with him fairly flying into a passion. “If you do not go away from these premises before night, I shall feel bound—indeed I am bound—to—to—to quit the premises myself!” I rather absurdly concluded, knowing not with what possible threat to try to frighten his immobility into compliance. Despairing of all further efforts, I was precipitately leaving him, when a final thought occurred to me—one which had not been wholly unindulged before.

“Bartleby,” said I, in the kindest tone I could assume under such exciting circumstances, “will you go home with me now—not to my office, but my dwelling—and remain there till we can conclude upon some convenient arrangement for you at our leisure? Come, let us start now, right away.”

“No: at present I would prefer not to make any change at all.”

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My Strangely Constant Danielle,

Damien, it must be confessed, is doing no better than you. I'm mired in legal troubles and literally bankrupt. My last possession, my car, sits hopelessly broken in the parking lot, while the woman I've been living with gives me rides back and forth to the bus station every day, in a wheezing car with an ever-widening crack in the windshield. The only money I make, I make in the form of the miniscule stipend I get for being a Teaching Assistant at the university, and by working for slave wages in its tutoring center. When the semester ends I will be unemployed.

[To answer your question:] I cheated on Dot because I felt neglected by her and because she didn't do enough, I thought, to flatter my vanity. I knew that I didn't deserve her, and rather than trying to improve myself, I debased myself further in defiance of the inevitability that I would lose her. We both debased ourselves. I saw her as a fallen woman, a kind of heathen, and I did what I could to revenge myself of the indignity of being kept by her. It wasn't a matter of breaking her heart--no one could have done this; only desecrating her hopes for a house and a husband to put in it. I cheated on Dot because I felt lonely and forgotten and unimportant and used. Then I realized that I would always feel that way no matter what, and no matter who loved me, or how much I was loved. I realized that I was wounded in a way for which there is no human remedy, and in a place where no human can reach. And so I ceased to love--though a cheater I remained.

I always knew that you and I were fundamentally the same, Danielle. I saw, boy that I was, that we were extraneous to the world and its mechanisms; that it would never know where to put us

or what to do with us once we were there. Your desolation drew me like the ageless echoes of a bottomless well. And here we both are, desolate as forever before--the immortal emblems of God's inexhaustible hatred for his own hideous handiwork. "Crazy suicidal loons," [as you say,] homeless wherever we go.

But of course that is why I have always admired you. The steady rejection of existence and its spurious purposes. The perseverance of "never" amidst the mockery of finitude.

#

Danielle,

I have only just received your last email, having been released from the hospital yesterday, following what I am not ashamed to say was as honest a suicide attempt as ever was made, be it ever so unsuccessful. If you are in New Paltz already, I will come to see you with all possible haste. If not, notify me at the instant of your arrival, and I will meet you at the first practical moment. I am scheduled to begin an intensive outpatient alcohol rehabilitation program at the beginning of next week, but since it is in Highland, which is the next town over from New Paltz, it will present no obstruction to our long overdue reunion.

I am co-signed on the lease with J., but since she has elected to adopt a new lover, we are now nothing but affectionate but otherwise unattached roommates. Being sober and once again in full

command of my faculties, I still find that the pursuit of romance ranks quite low on my scale of priorities, my considerations being mainly engaged in matters of a more metaphysical nature. In the absence of alcohol, I am now liberated to begin the path of asceticism for which I have always felt myself destined, beginning at present with a diet of bread and water. I desire more than anything to speak with you in person. Let us act with all diligence to see this hope realized.

Yours as ever,

-Damien

#

Hi, Danielle,

I'm glad you're doing somewhat better. My breakdown came as a combined consequence of untreated mental illness, alcohol abuse, and the pressures associated with finishing my masters degree. I'm entering a thirty-day inpatient treatment program very soon (perhaps as soon as tomorrow) to address the first two problems; the third I'll have to deal with in earnest when I get back. I'm still living with my ex-girlfriend until December, at which point I don't know what will become of me. Finding a way to come out and see you is still a goal of mine. If you have any ideas of how such a visit may be managed and arranged, providing the prospect of seeing me interests you at all, please do pipe in.

Yours,

-Damien

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Author's Note: here is represented a gap of a full year. Danielle at last wrote to me again following the death of a man she had resolved to marry, not knowing that he was already deceased of a heroin overdose.

#

Dear Danielle,

I just got up from the book I was reading, saw your email pop up in my inbox, and thought I'd reply right away. Usually I take a few days to think about these things, just because time doesn't really matter to me anymore, but the truth is I've been thinking about when I'd hear from you again, and I needed an excuse to stop reading for a while. I would say it's a good way to pass the time, but as I told you, there is no time. Not here. Not for me.

I truly am sorry about your friend--though anybody would be expected to say that, and I doubt it means much more coming from me, since I never knew him. I think you went to Ulster County Community College [where you met him] a couple years before I did. They make a lot of noise calling heroin an "epidemic" these days and vowing and frothing and bellowing to get it off the streets. My view is that heroin is an epidemic now only in the same way that bathtub gin was an epidemic in early-industrial Dublin. That is to say, the epidemic isn't heroin, it's goddamned

misery. Misery is the epidemic. Misery leads to despair, which, to sensible and sensitive minds (minds like ours), points to death. It happens that heroin, until it actually kills a person, is the closest to death one can get without the putative unpleasantness of dying.

I can say this because I myself did heroin for a while, and the nicest part about it is the bits I don't remember, because I was basically dead, and happy for the first time. That was the beginning of last year. My sister had kicked me out of her house, where I had been staying temporarily, because she mistakenly believed she would get visitation rights back with her children, and she would need the space. I went back to hopping from motel room to motel room, leaving a trail of beer cans and whiskey bottles from Kingston to Poughkeepsie, where a girl and I checked into a Ramada Inn and tried to commit double suicide with pills and alcohol. I slit my wrists for reassurance, while she watched and cheered me on. When I came to my senses, both she and I were in the hospital, painfully alive. We were sent to different sides of the same psychiatric ward, and after two weeks there, I checked myself into rehab where I met another girl--a waif of a junkie with a beautiful scar down the left side of her face, across the eye and cheek, long and jagged as a thunderbolt. When my program was finished, nobody would take me except the Salvation Army, where I lived and worked for a week before walking out on Christmas Eve. Eventually the girl got out of rehab, and, after some more hotel hopping, I ended up finding a room for rent downtown, moving in on New Year's Day and letting the girl share one half of the single bed. I went back to drinking, and straight away, she mustered her old contacts and got back into heroin and what-all else. Only the heroin interested me, though, so I started funding her habit on the condition that she shoot me up every day. For a lunatic minute it

was the three of us, heroin girl, suicide girl (who liked heroin too), and me, all up there in that little room, on that little bed, singing "Glory Hallelujah" and playing musical syringes. As I said, happy for the first time.

At some point, suicide girl got jealous of heroin girl and went back to her home in the mountains. Heroin girl stayed a little longer, and somehow talked *me* into going back to rehab, which is where I realized my debit card was missing. Heroin girl was always borrowing it when I was asleep--though, to her credit, she only used it for the things she couldn't shoplift. When I finally got out of rehab and back to the room, heroin girl had vanished forever, leaving overturned ashtrays and broken crack-pipes in empty cigarette cartons. More than a year later I still sleep--in the same single bed--under the same black comforter we had then, with all her little round burn-holes perforating it--tiny, hollow memories with hard, melted edges.

As you say, "We've been through so much."

I tell you this story for a number of reasons. The first is that I want you to believe that there is nothing I understand better than sadness, grief, and loss; not just the loss of others, but the loss of myself, the utter erasure of everything I ever thought I was or expected to be. To be fair, I really only pretended to have any respectable expectations for my life for the peace of mind of those, now all departed, whose lives were in some way or another bound up with mine. Deep down, I always knew I'd fail in the end, as, in their own secret way, almost everybody does. Secondly, it has given me pause over the years how, though your little emails only ever give me the

slenderest crack of perspective into your life, and though we haven't really spoken to each other in fifteen years, you're about the only person left in the world who still remembers that I exist, and still--very, very occasionally--peaks in to see if I'm still breathing. I don't really believe that means that you actually want to be burdened with knowing what my life has actually been like since...I don't know when; but I feel like I owe you the truth nonetheless, if only because I never kept anything from you when we did know each other, and there's no reason--indeed, less reason than ever--to keep anything from you now. I have always thought you worthy of nothing but the genuine article, even though I've let so many others repose in their illusions, denials, and cherished misconceptions. This must be very cruel of me, to not let you think me a better man, a better person. You deserve to believe that somebody out there is good. Or else why would you still write to me?

I finished writing a book not long ago, which I'm calling *The Prologemenon, or A Satanist in Love*. Or at least I thought I had finished it, but since completing the original manuscript, I've been thinking a lot about all the little pieces I still need to fit in somewhere. It's basically a straight-forward memoir--actually more of a confession--covering the first twenty years of my benighted existence, more or less by way of apology. It was mostly written out by hand when I was in the hospital for three months, getting electroshock therapy, as a way of keeping my memory banks from short-circuiting, and was conceived as being the first volume in a trilogy, dividing my life into three increasingly depressing and tragic "acts," and concluding, in the final volume, with a suicide note for an epilogue. Whether it's feasible or ethical to go on and write the second two parts is something I'm still debating with myself. So many undeserving people

stand to be implicated, simply because they knew me, and knowing me is enough to wreck a person forever. But I have so much still to apologize for, and an apology isn't valid unless it's expressed, and the offense (my whole life) appropriately atoned for. Anyway, it's only fair that I tell you that there are some pretty significant passages devoted to you, specifically, in this first book, owing to the fact that--whether you knew it or not--you were once a very profound presence in my younger life, and a source of vital inspiration, then and in days to come. My recollections of you back then are mostly dreamlike in nature, and that's probably how they seem in the text as well--dreamlike and faraway and floridly impressionistic. Somehow I always carry an image of you slipping into the mists, drifting away from the dock where we once sat together, one hand languidly outstretched, like the Lady in the Lake. I didn't put that in the book. Maybe I should have.

I don't need to tell you how much I'd like to know more about your life now, tragedies and all, but I'm not seriously expecting you to suddenly grow any more prolix on that front. We're both excruciatingly private people. It just happens that you keep your privacy with silence, and I keep mine by maintaining despotic poetical control of my own pseudo-mythic narrative.

If I ever came into an inheritance or something, I might come out to Colorado for a bit. Would you like that? Are you still in Colorado?

Ever yours,

-Damien

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The first time Dot's mother, my future mother-in-law--a music teacher--saw me with a guitar, it was at a picnic. Dot and I had been an item for months, and were already secretly engaged. Dot's mother requested that I play something, and I scrambled through my personal repertoire to think of the most romantic song I had written in recent times. While the women looked on expectantly, I settled myself and began to pluck out the sad, saccharine melody for "Bogomils & Barbelites," which Dot claimed to be one of her favorites, though she was only ever mildly tolerant of my being a songwriter. I played the song with all possible pathos, and Dot's mother listened with her eyes closed, applauding rapturously when it was finished. Surely her daughter deserved such vaunted sentiments from her lover. A year or two later, when I had become a de facto--though never quite comfortable--member of the family, Dot's mother presented me with a gift over which she had expended some labor. It was a covered and laminated musical score, in notes and scales that I couldn't read, of "Bogomils & Barbelites," which she held to be one of the most beautiful songs ever written. It was a treasure. I never supposed that either Dot or anybody in her family considered my craft to constitute "real music." At the same time, however, I couldn't help but blush a little at the irony of receiving such an honor from my kinswoman-to-be: an irony I dared never reveal to my bride.

"Bogomils & Barbelites" had been written, Danielle, for and about *you*.

#

The foremost reason I have adopted my present anchoritic life of essentially untrammelled solitude--and have, after a year of nearly continuous psychiatric incarceration, so meticulously avoided giving anyone the opportunity to put me back in the hospital--is because I have grown so desperately weary of hearing other people trying to tell me the value, meaning, and potential purpose of my own life. Doctors have done it, nurses have done it, minimum-wage techs and paramedics and fellow inmates halfway to Andromeda on Thorazine and Depakote have done it. Policemen have done it while wrenching my crimson-gushing wrists into tight, cleaving handcuffs and stuffing me into the unpadded plastic seats of their wailing mobile cages. Priests and pastors and self-proclaimed prophets have done it, along with all my pristine, pious relatives, with their pity-painted faces and their laying-on of soft and well-washed pentacostal palms. Their rationalizations, being none too inventive, can be easily surmised. I am a son, I am a father, I am a brother, I am a Beloved Creation of God. I am a husband, they might say, and then catch themselves and cough. I'm supposed to be miraculous because I was born dead and brought back to life by unwelcome and meddlesome machines. I am creative, sometimes ingenious, if anything I think too much and would be happy if only I stopped. I have talents that would have made me successful by now if I had not deeded them over to the powers of darkness. I could be the envy of multitudes if I could just quit hating myself. These are the opinions of my would-be saviors, my idiotic advocates, who would whitewash in an instant a canvas that thirty-five years of somber intention have wrought in black, and red, and pale, putrid yellow with a portrait of suffering incarnate.

When you speak, Danielle, of these "milestones"--these vital points of punctuation that were to make the difference between meaning and meaninglessness, purpose and pointlessness, desolation and belonging, worth and rubbish--whose milestones were they, really? It is the twenty-first century that has decreed that a woman is to leave her paternal (or maternal) home before she is wedded, submit herself to the sophistry of professors and the belching advances of illiterate coeds, move someplace hot where the buildings are too tall for the umbilical cord to follow, take a job doing something nobody knew needed doing (and wouldn't have needed doing if it weren't the twenty-first century), while atavistic fantasies of matrimony and parentage crouch like spectral idlers at a dusty and defunct train depot, appearing at midnight for no one to witness--deprived, even, of their ability to startle. Are these the milestones you have set for yourself, or are they the ones you were given, and have accepted as volitional in the same way that one sits willingly through an insufferable advertisement with the promise of returning to a program that holds as little interest and substance as the commercials that precede it? We mark our progress by the posts along the road, but was it we who built the road, beat the path, divined the destination? In Roman times it was a centurion who made his phalanx of one hundred men march from Galilee to Gaul, though there was nothing in Brittany or Burgundy or Northumbria to make it worth his being there. Today it is our century that makes its millions march from incubator to internet, from internship to incinerator, with yoga and the Food Channel and charity marathons to fill the interstice. Do you speak for yourself, Danielle, or do you speak for your century?

It is reasonable that you ask, "Who cares?" When every other excuse for living fails, there is always some beneficent bore around to insist that somebody, somewhere, must care about you. "Why, *I* care about you," he'll say, "and I don't even know you." To which you are of course meant to respond, "Well then--I suppose I'll just go on living forever and ever then, until there's no one left to care about anybody." Which would satisfy the beneficent bore entirely, because he has already transferred his immortalizing attentions to his ever-renewing Instagram, and didn't hear you anyway. That's what most of us are to each other in the twenty-first century: selfies with no selves. Is it not preferable, then, to be the portrait of suffering incarnate?

Here is where we must face the thing directly. I sit, legs crossed, hands folded, at the side of the desk of therapist number 5,811. We are nearing the end of our session. She asks, "Damien, is there nothing--no scenario at all within the realm of imagination--in which you could picture yourself being anything close to happy?" For the first time in fifty minutes I smile. Her eyes widen hopefully. I say, "If I were meant to be happy, *madam*, there would be nothing in the world that could stop me from being so." Silently she probes me, her clinically neutral eyes darting infinitesimally in their sockets as they drill into my own. "If that's so," she inquires, "why are you here?" My smile rescinded, I answer, "To make *you* happy, of course."

###

Chelsea [i.e., Heroin Girl] and I had a tidy arrangement. I paid for the rent and most of the heroin, while she prepared the heroin and took charge of its being administered. She probably

offered to teach me what she knew about measurements and temperatures and the locating of veins, but, even though I watched her eagerly and mentally recorded every sensuous motion of her magical hands, I never asked to cook my own dose or manage my own syringe. There would have been no romance in it. I wasn't trying to become a self-sufficient junkie; I was trying to experience beauty. I was looking for love on another level. And anyway, Chelsea was an adept amateur phlebotomist, and could tease out blue lengths of vein that innumerable registered nurses have failed to locate. Only in the end, when every vein she had was collapsed and ruined, did I have to witness her stab herself in twenty different places, weeping with frantic futility. I never inquired how Chelsea decided how much it was proper for either of us to take, although I always assumed that she reserved a greater portion for herself, simply because she had developed some tolerance and truly needed to be relieved of the physical pain that was the legacy of the accident that left her so gloriously disfigured. Still, I hoped every day that she would make some sort of innocent miscalculation and inject me with enough to carry me gently over the horizon. She had managed to overdose herself once, while I and the girl I had the suicide pact with looked on, but while we were arguing over what course to pursue, Chelsea spontaneously came out of it unaided--her spasms stopped, her eyes returned to their regular orbits, her breathing resumed. Inwardly I despaired that death was not foolproof, that it could catch someone and throw her back again, like a minnow unfit for the skillet. Who can you trust if Death itself is indecisive?

Obviously you're mourning Mike--mourning him horribly. But it's only too evident that you're mourning yourself as well. Specifically, you're mourning the self that overcoming your reluctance and acquiescing to Mike's amorous overtures might have called into being, as if there

is anything or anyone in the world who can actually induce such a transformation. When you tell me of how you finally made up your mind that there was no plausible recourse left for you outside of accepting Mike's half-forgotten proposal, it naturally causes me to summon up the memories of all the ill-timed revelations I've been subject to along nearly-identical lines. There's no end to the list of things I could have done to prevent Dot from walking out on me and setting me ineluctably on a path of grief and ignominy that I continue to trudge along ten years on. After all, it was Dot who arguably taught me how to be an actor, and all I needed to do to potentially preserve our cold and miserable marriage was to adopt and perform a role that would have kept her pacified. There is nothing that so consternates a director as when her leading man breaks out of character--that is, out of the character that he's been assigned to play. Only when it was unmistakable that my persona was chipping away and being eclipsed by a more commanding and (to her mind) recalcitrant reality did Dot fold up her script and stomp off the stage, trenchantly uninterested in trying to understand who I truly was, and why I was that way. It was just as well. I think I had pretty clearly worked out who she "really" was--quite early on, actually--and discovered a handful of sand where I was sure I had seen an oasis. I'm still getting the grit out of my teeth.

Mike, it seems, represented an impossible dilemma. On one hand, he gave you the possibility of achieving that sense of security that becomes oppressively more important as our youth retreats from view. He had a good job that awarded him with advancements, he knew you well and appeared to accept you, he promised to be a congenial, even-tempered, and (it must be said) docile mate who would supply for your wants and furnish you with that sense of place and

purpose that your lack of family has left you without. But the picture has two sides, and the one that you presently seem to be avoiding or underrating is Mike's evidently very powerful addiction to heroin, on which he was most likely spending every penny he earned. Addiction, I can tell you, is not just a habit one picks up and puts down again. Addiction is a *marriage*, and speaking as an erstwhile bigamist, I think I can vouch that a man can only be happily married to one spouse at a time. Addiction requires the deepest of commitments, the most rigorous and indefatigable dedication. It demands unqualified submission and loyalty to the death. As difficult as it may be to hear, Mike's death was not an accident. It was the only logical conclusion of a fatal romance that he had determined to pursue at the expense of all else. It was the end he chose for himself. So it's not just your own choice--or lack of decision--that you're mourning. While you were lost in vacillation between boyfriends that didn't interest you and a best friend to whom you were admittedly never attracted, Mike had already made up his mind to follow his White Mistress wherever she deigned to take him. That which the world dismisses as a weakness is in fact the product of the most unshakable and ironclad resolve. A true and invincible love.

Grieve as long as you have to, Danielle. Grieve for the rest of your life, if that's what you think is required. But be direct with yourself, I beseech you: are grieving for your friend, or are you grieving for yourself and what you surmise your friend could have given you, even though he had already given himself completely to something else?

#

A month or so ago I was downstate somewhere, having an early lunch with an acquaintance in a Taco Bell across from the sportsplex where we were dawdling the afternoon away, waiting for her car to be released from the shop. I had a sort of paternal softness for the girl--a dear, confused creature in her early twenties who had tried to kiss me but was not encouraged further--and I listened to her talk while swishing limp tortilla chips around in a nauseous pool of coagulating cheese sauce. She announced, without prologue or pretense, that Johnny had called her the day before. I looked up. Johnny was the lost love of her life, a friend of many years whom she had pined pitifully after since disagreements between them had led to an estrangement. She made the announcement with a significant kind of electrified melancholy, not alluding to what Johnny had called about, knowing that the mention of his name was enough for me to understand that it was nothing very favorable to the girl's hopes. Then she started to babble about how unworthy she felt of this Johnny, and how she needed to change herself in all sorts of ways if he was ever going to take her seriously. This annoyed me, and I asked tartly what exactly made her so undeserving of this majestic being's affections. "Well, for one thing, he wants me to stop smoking," she answered mournfully, "He says he could never date a smoker." I shoved my wretched platter off to the edge of the table and spoke angrily to her for the first time since we'd met, though it was not the first time I had found her irritating. "That's got to be the most stupendously ridiculous thing I've ever heard," I snapped, "If you want to smoke, that's your business, it's a personal choice. You have a right to your choices." "But he's right," she sputtered back in surprise, "It's bad for me, and maybe if I stopped, he'd...he'd..." Her voice descended into a tone of defeat. "Anyway, I don't see that it has anything to do with you."

I sat back and looked at her with a scowl I couldn't suppress. "It hasn't," I said, more harshly than I intended, "I just don't like to see you under anybody's thumb."

I'm remembering this episode because of something you told me earlier about Mike, and how you told him you couldn't be his girlfriend. You said you could never date a smoker. And before that--our phone conversation--when you explained that you had wanted him to become a vegan activist. "Did he have the slightest interest in doing that?" I had asked you. "Not at all," was your response. I took it no further. But it was an illuminating admission; it informed me a great deal about the nature of your relationship with this unfortunate, love-struck savant. The kind of relationship that I have been on one or the other side of more times than I have the stomach to number. A parable will illustrate what I mean:

A wealthy and vainglorious man struts into the gallery of a dealer in rare and fine antiquities. At once he sees a prize to which he gravitates without hesitation, a nude male figure in marble, delicately posed with one missing hand half-raised and the other at rest against its soft but muscular thigh. The proprietor stands beside it proudly and with an almost martial poise. "It's an Antinous, sir, dated to the reign of Hadrian," he brags, "recently acquired from the gardens of the Marquis D'Villavet. You are lucky to have laid eyes on it early, sir, yes, very lucky." "The price?" the rich man belts hungrily. "Why, sir," says the dealer, put off by his patron's abruptness, "It's priceless! One of a kind! But if one were really very seriously interested..." And

he leans in, imparting to the man a sum too embarrassingly enormous to record. The rich man nods shortly, unfazed. After a moment, with his eyes still gobbling up the statue, he bellows, "I'll take it! But I want it painted aquamarine. That corpse-like white is ghastly. And put some wings on it, so it'll fit in with my other angel sculptures. Make its priapus bigger; you can hardly tell he's a boy. And for God's sake," he adds to the now fainting antiquarian, "find it a bloody *hand!*"

We come to the people we love, and whom we hope will love us, in a broken and time-worn state. To the ones who truly love us, it is the cracks and amputations, the long-earned patina of exposure and experience, that give us our value, that make us worth keeping. Neither God nor fate has truck in custom-delivered "soulmates," whatever the internet dating services may promise. Even so, I've had and lost a handful of "soulmates:" interesting, beautiful, sometimes brilliant people who were my night and my day, my earth and my sky, sometimes for years, sometimes for weeks, often only for minutes...the space of a conversation, the space of a glance. The soul, at first blush, is not terrifically discriminating. Most of the time what it sees in another person, along with the initial spark of attraction, is nothing more than an outline—a promising figure to be filled out and painted in by the metamorphic mystery of love. We let our souls do this to us over and over again, putting its grandiose drapery on everyone we stumble upon, refusing to let us evaluate for ourselves the already finished masterpiece—or monstrosity, as the case may be—that lies beneath our shroud of delusions and stratagems.

Your trouble, so far as I am qualified to diagnose it, is not that you rebuffed Mike on outrageous pretexts before realizing too late that he was your heaven-intended, your one-and-only, your “soulmate” all along. Your trouble is that you know very well that he was never anything more than a kindhearted, indulgent, and more than you wanted to worry about, intensely tortured and unhappy friend; one harboring, like you, like me, a not-very-secret desperation for death. And also a horror of it, and of its intolerable appeal, which compelled him to lodge his hopes of recovering his waning life-force by securing your love, though you were ever so far away, and had no use for him in his present state. This is not intended as an assignment of blame on either of your parts. I have not the authority nor the interest to condemn anybody except myself, and that takes up all of my time. You were not intentionally cruel to Mike—by no means! You simply didn't understand that he was already a complete human being, a finished piece. You couldn't understand that about Mike because you couldn't understand it about yourself. You were still waiting for somebody to come around and sweep up the fragments of your neglected self, glue them back into place, apply the finishing touches and set you in front of the mirror to whip off the blindfold and see “yourself” for the first time. All of this time you've been seeing yourself as completely broken, not as complete in your brokenness.

I can only faintly understand why it's important for you to assure me that I'll find “my Dot” again. I worry that it's because you do not see me as being a whole person without her. After all, once something as magnificent and impressive as Dot falls away from the architecture of one's life, one's identity, how much could really be left? Not enough to inhabit, surely—not in any

civilized way. I fear that you think that I've simply spent these ten years squatting miserably in the bombed-out skeleton of my abandoned, dilapidated self. I want you to believe me, then, when I tell you that there is nothing in the world that interests me less than finding another "Dot." And that's saying a lot, considering how little interest I have in anything at all. I want you to understand that my life didn't end when Dot slammed the kitchen door behind her, with me collapsed in the stairwell, sobbing, "I need you! I need you! I need you!" No, dear Danielle, my life ended long, long before that. Dot had merely untethered herself from my carcass.

Let us agree to form a resolution, you and I. Let us resolve that however our countless disappointments, our jostles and fractures, conspire to dissuade us, we are complete in our brokenness. Some parts of us may yet heal; fresh wounds will take their place. But it's like I always say when people gawk and titter at the thousand self-inflicted scars that blanket my arms and wrists and chest: "I wouldn't be complete without them. I wouldn't be able to recognize myself."

###

There you go, asking impossible questions. When was my last truly happy moment? One can get into considerable trouble trying to answer a question like that. It would be better, in my case, to ask, "When was the last time that anybody in the world other than you would have been at least momentarily happy?" But then, I've never been much good at understanding why other people

experience (or claim to experience) happiness when they do, so even this would be mere grasping in the dark. I might say, for instance, that it was the last time I put my arms around my daughter, almost two years ago now. It was a surprise visit, just long enough for a hug and a kiss and a few salutary words: the last I ever expected to speak to her. What I didn't tell her was that the unknown woman in the car I was driving was the second party in a suicide pact that we would both try to fulfill in a hotel room later that night. I still have the bloodstained suicide note I scribbled out shortly before losing consciousness on the floor, addressed to the daughter whom I had hours before promised I'd see again soon. It's barely legible, but I'll try to transcribe it for you, even if doing so does call up a tear or two.

November 21, 2015

Beloved Haley,

My first and most important request is that you do not spend a single moment of your own life trying to understand why I needed so badly to die. I could wear out the pages of this miserable notebook and end up with nothing but ancient platitudes and excuses created by poor fools who were no more enlightened regarding their own urge to take leave of the only world they'd ever had chance to love, as I do [now.] My death, glorious girl, is no longer my own once I have left it with you.. The horror of understanding this and the unnameable betrayal it unavoidably implies is a matter beyond the last resource of useless tears to wash away. Just please, if you can forgive me enough to listen to what I ask, don't live like other people. Don't assume that you

were given life and beauty and genius because God hands these things out like tickets at a show nobody would pay to see. Knowing you has been everything to me, and it will be everything to me as I indulge in the undeserved pleasure of watching you from behind the veil.

You Are My Sunshine,

-Daddy

I never wrote, "I love you." It would have been monstrous coming from a father who had just slashed his wrists and drowned half a bottle of pills with a liter of cheap blended whiskey. "I love you" never works as a balm or an anodyne for anything. More often than not, it only works as a mauling mechanism; a verbal attempt to tear someone's eyes out.

I had no notion, waking up bandaged and bewildered in a bright cranny of St. Francis Hospital, that I would never again cross the Mid-Hudson Bridge to see the "glorious girl" whose life I had just tried to make into a permanent and inescapable tragedy, whose light I had just schemed to extinguish. Indeed, I would never be invited to. I wonder if, during that mad, unannounced visit, when I swooped in from the cold night to leave Haley with what I expected to be my final benediction, she intuitively knew that one way or another, she was seeing me for the last time...*thank God*. I tried hard, between hospital stays and rehab stints, to get in touch with her after that, but the more obvious it became that I was being intentionally ignored, the sadder and more resigned I grew. Something Out There didn't let me die that night because It knew that I was still ignorant of the deepest pain imaginable. It wanted me to live with the absolutely

unbearable knowledge that my daughter, my sunshine, my only good mistake, was glad to be rid of me—was *relieved* to be like the rest of her half-siblings, with no clumsy, useless fathers to make them ashamed, drag them around, imposing wearisome demands on their time. She didn't need me to be proud of her. The pride of fathers is just another obligation, this I well know. My father is puffed up to the gills over me and all it does is make my heart hurt. I woke up two years ago to the realization that all a father gives to his child is a body. Then that body stands up and walks away, and all that's left for the father is a figment of his imagination, a hallucination he invents for himself so he can have something to be proud of. Fathers are the stupidest people on earth. Christ, look at King Lear!

So that would have been the last happy moment I can remember, if there were actually anything happy about it; happy like all those people waving handkerchiefs and hopping up and down as the *Titanic* pushed off port; happy like getting a telegram from the President himself saying Billy died with honor. Why shouldn't we be happy? Everyone on the *Titanic* got famous and Billy died with honor. We should all be very, very happy.

I got a sweet little text from Haley on my birthday, a week ago. She probably saw a notice on Facebook or something, or somebody else saw it and told her. Nobody else texted or called or wrote, and I was glad as hell that they didn't, as it would have interrupted my drinking and made me feel sick. I texted Haley right back and said she had made me the happiest man in the world. "I love you," I wrote, and I chucked the phone away, deciding whether I should go to the bathroom and vomit. I always feel better after having a good heave-ho. On the corner of the bed,

I heard the phone beep again. I picked it up and turned it over. “I love you too, dad!” it said.

There was no time to get to the bathroom. I reeled around and retched into the wastepaper basket instead.

It's such a “Dot” thing to say, isn't it? “You should work for Democracy Now!” “You should work with blind horses!” “You should donate kazoos to the children of Zambia!” The second-to-last time I saw her, seven years ago, it was in the parking lot of a Barnes & Noble. I was there with the woman who until recently had been my fiance, trying to make some kind of peace after calling the wedding off three months before it was supposed to take place. Dot saw us, and for some reason I'll never understand, she came over, bounding up to us with that crazy swinging stride that always made me think of a long-armed ape. I may have tried to smile, but my companion made no effort. This particular woman had spent two years trying to wrench me away from Dot, and another two waiting for me make her Wife Number Three. Now the wedding was off, and here came Wife Number Two, grinning as if her face would burst into a galaxy of blazing suns. God knows what I said to Dot, it was all too much for my brain to take in, but she told me she had gotten her master's degree in Early Childhood Education or something close to that. It's all I can remember of the whirlwind exchange. That and feeling utterly disgusted that I didn't have my master's yet; I was still finishing my second bachelor's, which had been in Secondary Education, until I bombed as a student teacher and changed it to English. (That's a story for another time, maybe never, if you're lucky.) She buzzed back to her car, the same blue Pontiac we had spent so much time together in when we were married—long, joyless drives with NPR filling the silence and Haley pensive in her booster seat—and I figured

that was that. Later that year, though, around the time of my birthday—my twenty-eighth, I guess it would have been—I met her again, at funeral of the wife of a friend in Westchester. He had apparently kept in touch with my ex-wife without my knowledge, being, as all my friends were, passionately in love with her from the beginning. Generally I like funerals, but this one was ruined. After my friend had poured himself on her and blubbered through her mechanical condolences, she went to sit directly behind us, where she looked over my right shoulder. We said a few things, quietly, like people who had met in a conference somewhere and felt lost without their name-tags. Then a look of pain came across her, and she asked about Haley. She was doing great, I told her, loving school in Kerhonkson (a pale, rustic replacement for the liberal private school she had been attending when Dot and I were married.) Then, leaning forward more, Dot pressed, urgently, “Does she ever talk about me? Do you think she would want to hear from me, ever?” Merely asking the question had already brought her to tears (making her the only person crying at the funeral besides my bereaved friend), and for a moment I considered lying to her, knowing how horrible the truth would be. But a lie would only complicate matters, so my answer was unprevaricating. “I asked Haley about that not long ago,” I said. “I was worried that she never talked about you, and thought she might be hiding something or repressing it for some reason. I wanted her to know it was OK if she brought you up, that my feelings were safe. I asked her if she'd like for you to write her a letter or something. She said...her exact words were...that she really didn't care.” Dot jumped from her seat, stifling a wail with her hands, and ran from the sanctuary. I tried to follow her, an old husband's instinct to comfort his wife, but the exit door was already swinging, and I would never see her again. Three years after that I got a piece of mail from her, containing a check having something to do with

our old house, which she was letting go into foreclosure. The return address was somewhere in Connecticut and she had a different last name, something Italian and loathsome to pronounce. The check was for a small amount, but she wanted me to co-sign it and send it back to her, which, after a few drinks to make the shaking stop, I did. She had enclosed with the check a brief note--instructions and a thanks in advance. It was perfumed with the scent of embarrassment. I got the feeling—maybe it was a hope—that she wasn't happy. Clearly she couldn't afford to maintain our former property, couldn't find anybody to lease or buy it, and two hundred dollars only means something to people who are worried about money, which I knew because I was *always* worried about money. People like us have nothing left over to donate to Democracy Now! or blind horses or kazooless Zambian kids. At the time I was living with a girlfriend who disgusted me and treated me like mongrel dogshit, because I couldn't afford a place of my own going to grad school and teaching freshman writing. I etched a note back, equally brief, and perfumed with the scent of liquor. “Sorry to hear about the house,” it said, “Take care.”

You only say “take care” to people about whom you care nothing. It was hypocritical though, because I was so *angry* when I wrote it: angry to see her name again, or at least the half of it that was once attached to mine; angry to see her handwriting, just like the frolicking curlicues on the notes she used to leave for me on the kitchen table; angry that she was living in Connecticut, where my father's maternal side had chartered a town in Colonial times; angry that she had even taken the trouble to find out where I was living, all for the sake of what amounted to grocery money. I had assumed she had married someone who could provide her with more security. (Don't Italians always have money? Isn't that what nepotism is for?) I had assumed she would be

working someplace wonderful, where all the children and all the parents and all the administrators and custodians and hamsters and teddies and dollies and yellow-headed Lego men simply worshiped her, the way everyone always worshiped her. I had assumed that I had been giving her a chance at having the life she always wanted and deserved by letting her divorce me without a fight—ceding her everything, treating it like a penance. After all that I lost by practically forcing her to leave me, to save herself, to take my heart and carry it away forever, here she was—not rescuing the world, not freeing the animals, not opening profit-sharing factories making vegan dog biscuits and teething rings from recycled condoms—but asking for the world's most worthless signature...for grocery money. That's what made me angry enough to write, “Take care.”

It's funny, though, how everyone else always worshiped Dot for being somehow extraordinary and beatific and semi-divine, and you only worshiped her because she was, in your opinion, “normal.” Good God! What did that make me, the man who somehow seduced and carried off the most “normal” person you knew? Was I God? Was I devil? Was I somehow so uncannily, preternaturally *mediocre*—so inconceivably *banal*--that the epitome and model and apotheosis of normality found me impossible to resist? Can it be that Dot simply realized too late what you had known all along: that all she actually wanted was to be “normal?” To have and to do and to love normal things and normal people, and to never, ever be surprised. And that's why she fell in love with me, and why she hated me so indescribably in the end. I was always so full of surprises.

Surprise! Another mistress. Surprise! I lost my job again. Surprise! I'm an alcoholic now.

Surprise! I'm unconscious in the bathtub and covered in blood. Surprise! Surprise! Surprise!

You're beginning to see by now that Dot was less of a director, and more of an audience for the grotesque and ever more obscene and revolting spectacle that was me. Never mind that most of the horrid things I did, I did when she wasn't looking, and because she wasn't looking. She was something of a Midas of the bourgeoisie: everything she touched turned normal, tepid, and just a little bit pathetic. I spent every minute I could get away from her trying to keep that from happening to me. I frankly wore myself out trying to sluice up new infamies, scandals, and outrages. I wore her out too, keeping her in a perpetual state of panic, perplexity, and dismay. It was when she realized that she had entered the audience and left the stage, that the principle actor in her perfectly orchestrated melodrama—a melodrama of unbroken normality—had gone wildly off-script and was holding a gun to his own head while howling an incoherent monologue he had written in blood—it was then that she knew that she hated me. It was then she could fling a frying pan at my head and scream, “Do you have any idea how *unfulfilled* I am?” And then she could kick a hole in the bedroom door and rip the bed to pieces shrieking, “I want a divorce! I want a divorce! I want a fucking *divorce!*” And then she could sleep with the leading man in an amateur musical about firefighters written by one of my professors and best friends, then call me to brag about it from a hick bar, drinking for the first time since I had soused her with wine on a punctiliously normal camping trip. She had learned from me by then. She had learned how to make me notice. And yes, I was even a little surprised.

Maybe now we won't have to talk about Dot anymore. It isn't seemly. I'm the only one still left from the old days to whom her memory isn't entirely sacred. I've blasphemed enough for one lifetime.

It's probably good that you have that reflex of reserve when it comes to your own death, that impulse that says that maybe life is worth giving a chance—not as it is, but as it might be if something truly fundamental and definitive were to change. It's not a matter of relocation: you've tried that and discovered that where you are is essentially meaningless, that happiness has no zip code. It's not a matter of finding love: in order to find something, you have to know what you're looking for, and love for you is still a shapeless and intangible enigma. You seem to think it has something to do with how you occupy yourself, a job that's somehow more natural, wholesome, and honest than the one you've got now (or the one that has you), new hobbies that normal people take part in and that make them feel healthy and satisfied with themselves. But that's just your century talking again. Yesterday it was badminton and parlor-room seances; today it's yoga, 5k marathons, kale smoothies and walks against malignant vaginitis. I had the same thought—*something has to change; something vital, the central theme around which my existence now pivots*. The craziest thing I could think of, other than giving up drinking, which turns me into a useless, paranoid neurotic every time I try it, was to leave my room at 9:55 every Sunday morning and walk to the church at the end of my street. Not the big Baptist church where everyone wears a hat, nor the little storefront church on the way to the liquor store, where the preaching and testifying go on far into the afternoon, nor the First Congregationalist Church, festooned in rainbow flags and the promises of “no judgment,” like a populist fitness club, but

the safe and sedate Episcopal church, with its red Books of Common Prayer, its crosses and its censers, and its majestic High Church rituals, Father Jones presiding. I learned when to kneel and when to stand, how to sing the Doxology and the *Agnus Dei*, how to bow to the altar upon entering and leaving the pew, how to take Communion, with hands first cupped to receive the Host, then closed in prayer until the Cup comes. The churches I spent my childhood in were nothing like this picture of serene and reverent orderliness. In those churches people danced like maniacs, gibbered at the top of their voices in made-up languages, and piled on top of each other trying to channel the Holy Spirit into some unsuspecting sinner. At St. Paul's Episcopal, you have to wait all month for Father Jones to paint a cross in oil on your forehead and put his hands on your shoulders, to bless you by name and move on down the line. It's actually extremely affecting, and few of the congregation choose to forego it. I once stopped into the storefront church on the way to the liquor store and asked the pastor there for a blessing. He gave me the kind I was used to from youth, pushing his hands into me like he was trying to topple me over, shouting as if God had forgotten to turn on His holy hearing aid. It gave me the jitters and made me feel sapped; not sapped as in relieved of a burden, but sapped as in having survived an assault. My brother, who has inherited from our father the probably hopeless ambition to start a church of his own, once came to me while I was in the hospital, sustained by fluids and too weak to walk, to lend me his personal Bible and say a blessing over me. It was a bit humiliating, receiving this benediction from my identical twin, his voice full of gravitas as he recited a formula he must have learned in a book written for people who were actually ordained. Still, it's nice to get a blessing from just about anyone, even the vagrant you just gave a dollar to. We should all get and give a lot more blessings. Maybe it would bring God down from the rafters for

a while, to sort of scoot around the crowd and see if there's anything He can do for anyone.

Maybe if each of us gave some other person a blessing once a day, we'd do a little to slow down the rot inside of him or her, and the rot inside ourselves, even though we'll know that our blessings are nothing but good luck charms, airy talismans to ward off the Evil Eye and keep the snakes from biting.

Well, bless you, Danielle. Bless you and goodnight; may your soul taste a hint of the peace that awaits you down the way, and may the morning arrive gently, to shoo away the memories of disquieting dreams.

###

I'm speaking out of turn here, but the sight of unfortunates cocooned on the collapsing benches of Malcom X Park as I was walking to church this morning made me think of it, and distracted me throughout the service. I think it's too bad you're giving the dog back. I wish that people had more room in their hearts for the unwanted, the unanticipated, and the displaced. So you wanted a male and you got a female: how many monarchs have shared your sullen repugnance for an irreversible truth? Why should it be so paramount a condition that a companion you half expect to abandon to death be possessed of one set of organs rather than another, since you aren't running a stud farm, and you surely have no serious intention of coupling with the beast and fostering his *homo canis* pups. Or so I am bold to hope. Why not keep the thing that already loves you, unreservedly and without suspicion, and give it a neutered name like Morgan or Kelly

or even Damien? I shared a class with a female Damien at Ulster, and no offense to your dog, but she really was a bitch. I am speaking as a man who has personally funded three aborted pregnancies. I have seen the shell-shocked stare of three women, shuffling unescorted from the forbidden chamber, struggling to comprehend an emptiness for which their experience held no equivalent. Last night I told you, jestingly but in perfect truth, that every misanthrope I have ever known was a rapturous lover of dogs, rhapsodizing to all who'd listen that he'd knock the brains out of every man, woman, and child on earth if it meant the life of a single flea-bitten terrier. What is this but the voice of disappointment? Dogs succeed where people fail, dogs return when people vanish, dogs lick the feet that kick them. "Like a dog to his own vomit," the Gospel goes.... As a devout sectarian of the feline tribe, I have many times observed that compared to cats, dogs are regrettably devoid of detectable personality; this one being docile, this other being aggressive, this one over-fond and the other over-vigilant, this one yaps and that one thunders. These are the limits by which a dog's presumptive personality is bound. Male and female are thoroughly indistinguishable, especially when the agents of propagation are removed. Why should you reject a dog that has already proven it can love you? How can an animal that loves you be making your life in any way worse? There are some dogs that snap and bare their teeth only at men, others only at women, others only at children who can meet them at eye-level. Are we not more sensible than dogs when it comes to confronting our prejudices and assessing our fears? Is not the word "dog" pejoratively associated with abjectness and servility for a reason? It is the most dog-like of men who leashes himself to a bias of his own construction.

With the little that you recounted of this early crisis between Dot and me, this “fallout,” I must still confess that it recalls nothing whatsoever to my memory. The whole incident is a literal blank. It may be that everyone who witnessed it is capable of describing it but me, its principal and catalyst. Sharon, my sister-in-law, saw me kissing someone else during a gathering at her own mother's house? Who on earth could I have been kissing in a place like that, with so little space or opportunity for clandestine movement? One may conjecture that I sneaked upstairs with somebody, but the living room was always crowded, and everyone would have observed with curiosity such an inexplicable defection. And who, for that matter, would have been worth the risk? For heaven's sake, if you were there, as you clearly were, why wasn't it you I was redirecting my lecheries upon, while you were our guest and the opportunity was in full blossom? Of my coming home alone with you and the subsequent arrival of my parents, I can make nothing at all. It's simply too incredible. I have long been diagnosed with a dissociative disorder, which is sometimes blamed for my doing things which I cannot afterwards remember, but the fact that all of this seems to be the action of a film that I have never seen is unaccountably bizarre, even beyond belief. I may as well have awoken on death-row for a murder I never consciously committed. Of all the godawful, maudlin scenes I went through with that poor, tormented woman, why should I not be able to remember this one? God, I don't even know what year this was supposed to have happened in!

While your supposition that I am slipping out of this life and going the way of Mike is doubtless justifiable, it must be confessed that the prognostications you have made for the duration remaining until you have settled upon your own demise—let's call it “the Phenobarbital

Scenario"--are somewhat more generous than anything I would propose for myself. The prospect of living even one more year frankly fills me with stark terror and nauseous dread. The month when this miraculous and fairy-tale like inheritance was supposed to come down to me has passed without event, and being above all things a thoroughgoing pessimist, I am now more inclined than not to pronounce the whole bothersome matter a tasteless joke or thoughtless error. When my aunt whispered conspiratorially to my brother and me at my great-uncle's funeral reception that we were in line for more money than we expected (I never expected any) and that she hoped we would use it as an opportunity rather than squandering it (she actually only said this last part to me, even though my brother is the one who bought a Victorian mansion, the maintenance of which he could never afford), I dismissed her words as a mere buzzing in the ear, and was thereafter uncertain whether I had really ever heard them at all. After that a few papers came for me to sign, followed by a check from one of my great-uncle's insurance policies, which was certainly nice, but nothing to whisper about. I assumed that my well-to-do aunt simply thought I had never seen money before, and would be overwhelmed by the receipt of even a tawdry amount. I deposited the check and set about drinking my way through it, assured that I had seen the last of the family fortune. Months passed and I received, one afternoon, a surprise visit from my brother, who sat as he always does in the only chair my room has, looking claustrophobic and reproachful. I sat cross-legged on the bed and took sips of my vodka-and-gingerale. We chatted for a few nervous minutes, but, impatient as ever to get back to his leaky-shingled mansion, where the wife and the children and the foster-child and the dog and the cats and the chickens all are kept huddled safely away behind a wrought-iron fence and a high-tech home security system, my twin cut pretty directly to the chase. He said that our aunt

had once again told him that money was coming down to us from our great-uncle's estate, and he mumbled a sum that he seemed embarrassed to speak aloud. I was dizzy for a moment and I set down my ghetto cocktail. Neither of us smiled. The air was heavy as a mausoleum's musk. "This isn't exactly good news you bring me," I said at last, "I've gotten used to the way I live; I've been counting the days till I reached the end of my resources, so I wouldn't have an excuse..." A sharp, sullen look from my brother cut me off. He could never endure such talk from me—talk of my own death, a pornographic and unmanly obsession. He loves life madly and wants it to last forever and ever, the way he loves computers madly and thinks everybody should be one. I concluded, "This just gives me so much more to have to think about." "Right," said my brother, shifting on the unpleasant seat, "So I'm just not going to think about it." "Me neither," I agreed, and we both lowered our shoulders in simulated relief. He let himself out and I listened to his steps jogging gingerly down three flights of stairs. And then, God help me, I started to think about it.

"I am a-weary, weary; I would that I were dead," sighs the bereft bride waiting for her lost sailor to materialize in the waves. In the months since my brother's visit, I've become that dolorous widow, suspended in a continuous state of intolerable anticipation, wishing only that the horrible thing would wash up on my doorstep already so I can dig it a grave and be free of it. I know that I'll be destitute and homeless soon, and I've accepted that as my rightful reward for being such a useless piece of garbage all my life. If this fairy-tale inheritance actually appears, though, the whole equilibrium of my self-projected fate, any feeble notion of karmic retribution I still entertain, will be instantly overthrown. I never asked for the goddamned money, everyone knows

I'm too dissipated and foolish to make any practical use of it, and I hate the world so much that there is nothing money can purchase that could make me hate it any less. But if it *is* coming, that means I have to wait for it, and if I have to wait for it, that means that I'm not free to kill myself whenever I want. This wicked little rumor has me hog-tied good and proper, trussed to life and chin-deep in its sordid concerns. All I ever wanted was a bottle of bourbon, a venerable old tome, and a rope to hang myself with. But now I have *this*—this ungainly specter—preoccupying my mind and pegging me down to this world I despise, along with everything in it.

But there is something else that I fear. Suppose the money actually does come before I die of frostbite in a bus shelter. All right, I've planned for that: I'll just put it in a fund for my daughter to collect when she comes of age, then, with nothing left to wait for, go someplace discreet to find the death I've been seeking for so long. But what if something changes in me when the money is in my hands? What if it occurs to me, by way of sudden epiphany, that the struggle is over: that my long, solitary slide into soul-consuming poverty and debasement has been halted, and indeed, reversed? No longer will I have to choose between doing my laundry or buying a bottle to cradle through the night. No longer will paying my rent feel like vivisection with a chainsaw. No longer will my noble philosophy of stoic self-denial be the involuntary product of gnawing necessity. No longer will the baneful lessons of penury have to be repeated day after grinding, grief-filled day. And then a most horrifying and sacrilegious thought: what if, disburdened of the millstone of constant worry and want, the ever-faithful, ever-enticing invitation of death suddenly grows softer, loses its cajoling urgency, begins to dissolve into wistful abstraction? What if a little bit of money is enough to prove that for three-and-a-half decades, it hasn't been life as a principle I've been rejecting and excoriating and deploring, but

merely the implacable hardness of it, the futile prospect of interminable opposition by the forces of nature and society? What if life as such was never my true enemy, but *survival*—the act of endlessly fighting to keep something I never asked for, and have no reason to want? Could that be possible? Could I find myself standing there, the pistol in one hand and, in the other, a fistful of my shadowy great-uncle's liberating lucre, and say to myself, despite all I have said before, “After all, there is no hurry?” Am I so effortlessly corruptible as this—to be a heretic to my own heresy—a Judas to myself?

Better that the money never come. But it *is* coming! Isn't it?

I was in the hospital with a young man named Richard, with whom I found uncommon affinity. He was precisely my age, an insatiable reader, and an aspiring man of letters who had written reams of poetry and what he claimed to be a novel. Showing me more than the wonted degree of trust, he let me read the “novel” when we became roommates. Scrawled out in microscopic shorthand, in the back pages of a travel-worn journal, it was an ambling story about a rural drug dealer that was scarcely long enough to be a novella, but could have sufficed as a chapbook if it were ever tamed into being a finished work. I was writing a book myself at the time about which the same could easily be said. Anyway, Richard's story (his real story, not the one he wrote) was this: he was a chronically homeless rambler going from one temporary residence to another, well-read but otherwise without education, with no experience in any particular field and no hope of obtaining regular employment. I asked him why he was in the hospital, and he said it was because he had tried to commit suicide, though he declined to describe of what this attempt

consisted. My suspicion was that he needed a place to hole up and get fed for a couple of weeks while the doctors decided what to do with him. I asked him what his diagnosis was, and again, he was effusive but vague. His primary affliction, I was finally able to learn, was a certain recurring delusion, according to which he was unalterably convinced that on any given day, at any given hour, a secret benefactor would anonymously bestow upon him enough money to put him up comfortably for the rest of his life. In return Richard was to be the author of the Great American Novel. He had harbored this troublesome conviction for many years, though when exactly it arose, and why, was more than he could say. But the difficulty was enhanced by the detail that, the longer Richard maintained his delusion, and the longer it went on unrealized, the greater the promised endowment became, following, it seems, the inscrutable market forces of the Muses. At the time of our acquaintance it had risen into the tens of millions. At various points throughout the years, Richard told me, he had come to momentarily despair that there was no phantom patron, no tens of millions, and no future for his art. These instances typically culminated in some sort of suicidal gesture. But the fanatical resilience of the delusion was such that it always returned with greater force, increased ardor, and a more opulent payout. In Richard's mind, he was the world's wealthiest hobo; all he had to do was wait, and check his email every day, until the glorious message finally arrived. *In a field south of X, in the passenger's seat of an abandoned VW, a knapsack has been hidden. Take the knapsack, keep all of the money inside, and then write, Richard, write!* Incidentally, Harper Lee wrote *To Kill a Mockingbird* under circumstances almost precisely like these. Some people consider it the Great American Novel. She didn't write again for nearly sixty years. Maybe she was waiting for another email.

If only all of our delusions served us so well as Richard's, and kept us as cheerful. Really, the man was indomitable: the longer his delusion *failed* to come true, the richer he got! It could be that madness is merely a means of self-preservation for genius otherwise misapplied, and unequipped for the blaring blunt-force of reality. Both of us, you and me, have been the victims of our own delusions; both of us have used them to defend us from a reality that we could see but never dared to confront. These delusions somehow kept us alive even though there was nothing about living we liked. Now that the shield of Perseus has been turned upon Medusa, and the Gorgon herself turned to inanimate stone, shall we smash our delusions into fragments, or simply go on offering them prayers and sacrifices like the graven idols they always were? If I keep on saying, in a self-mollifying mantra, "I'll be dead within the year, I'll be dead within the year..." well, one of these years, it's going to have to be true.

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As far as I know, the inheritance is real. My brother received the information from my aunt, and gave me the number of my great-uncle's accountant, who told me that there had been a delay due to a filing error, but that the legacy should be distributed between July and August. Now that August is basically here, and I'm down to my last hundred dollars of savings, and have already had to ask my landlord for a rent extension, you can understand why I'm getting nervous. I want to be drinking something decent when I kill myself, and I want to be in a hotel room, somewhere

nobody would think to look for me. I imagine I'll need more than a hundred dollars to accomplish that.

No, I don't seriously believe that any amount of money would cure me of my suicidal ideations. That was what the electroshock was practically guaranteed to do, but all it actually did was lead to all sorts of unforeseen medical accidents that significantly reduced my respiratory capacity for several months. Also, I got to know a nice married woman entirely too well. But they sent me home after a dozen treatments, with extra time for medical care, tragically lovelorn and as death-crazed as ever. Suicide is built into me. I can think about it while watching a comedy, I can think about it while making love, I can think about myself thinking about it while thinking about it. The fear I expressed in my email was simply that having the most pressing material burdens of my life eased a little might dull the desperation, the immediacy of my desire for death. It might allow me to luxuriate in the thought of death rather than leaping upon it with the frenzy of a medieval martyr. I have long labored to counter the generally-held stereotype that suicide is invariably and without fail a rash, desperate, and essentially irrational act; but if I weren't at least a little desperate for it, I would just sit back and let the drinking kill me.

#

I'm sorry, poor friend, that I didn't see your requests that I call you last night. I turned my computer off fairly early to obviate the temptation to sit back down and keep on writing. My bum had started to hurt from days in front of the screen, chasing down that blinking vertical line

that flashes behind every new word, taunting, *surely that can't be all you've got to say*. This is a malady I've suffered from my entire adult life. People think that all they're doing is sending and responding to emails, scratching their unsteady way toward some kind of maddeningly elusive conclusion. In my mind, however, I'm writing a new book, and my correspondent is a kind of phantasmagorical collaborator, suggesting where the psychological narrative should turn. I already have a working title for the book that I'm writing every time I collect myself for a four-hour session of composing one of my replies to an email from you. Does this constitute exploitation? Of course it does. Is it the only thing making life even faintly tolerable or excusable right now? Yes, yes it is. I am actively encouraging your litanies of sorrow and self-loathing because it's good for my "process" and it gives me the kind of material that inspires me the most. Which is not to say that I'm not writing to you, and only to you. I read something by Vonnegut recently where he conjectured that every serious writer writes for an audience of one—an ideal Reader with a face and a name and a history, somehow bound to that of the writer himself. I've always found this to be true. It's actually impossible for me to write to a "general audience." Every time I've tried it turns out like trash; the difference between a meal prepared lovingly for two and a vat of rancid slop churned up for unidentified hundreds. Even when I worked as a journalist, when I had no idea whose eyes would eventually fall across my words, I could only do good work when I reduced my focus to writing whatever would enrage my editors most half-an-hour before deadline. The only flaw with this is that, when you're writing for a newspaper, you have to assume that the person you're writing for will be reading it tomorrow, and then lobbing it in the bin. To write anything worthwhile, one has to imagine his Reader living at least a hundred years in the future. When I write to you, I try to write as if both of us

have been dust and ashes for decades or centuries, and my letter is all the world will ever know of us. This is a terrible thing to be confessing to you, because the last thing you want is to be immortalized, especially by somebody as consistently devious and unreliable as me. That's why I have an old college friend who from time to time reasserts his intention to become my "Boswell." He knows me, and he has no faith that I am capable of representing myself honestly. Bland men make the best biographers. Dr. Johnson composed biographies of his own, and nobody remembers a single person he ever saw fit to eulogize.

Forget everything I said about the dog. I began by acknowledging that I was speaking out of turn, and I was. I've never had an animal that wasn't either unwanted or feral, other than the gerbils I bought for my daughter, and they were wretched enough all the same. I wasn't thinking of the dog that was sent to you as something you had invested in and dreamed about, something that you were relying upon to be precisely as you wanted it to be. There are plenty of times in all of our lives when we must accept the unexpected and adapt to it, but for most people, it shouldn't have to be that way *all* of the time. It simply happens that in my case, I can't remember the last instance in which I was ever actually able to exercise choice in anything. I live where I live not because I want to, but because I can (or could, until now) just barely afford it. I don't like being in the city, but I stay here because I have to walk to supply my daily needs, as I haven't the means to maintain a car or renew my expired driver's license. I pretend the little gray mice that infest my room are my pets because the landlord wouldn't permit me to have a cat, even if I had the space for one, which I don't. When I eat—which isn't often—it isn't a matter of eating what I enjoy, but whatever is cheapest and requires the least amount of preparation, since all I have to

cook with is a single microwave that the whole building shares. I had a coffee-maker that I could cook instant noodles with, but it stopped working, and I can't buy a new one. All this has led to the loathing of food that has come to exhibit itself as a sort of enforced *anorexia nervosa*, the natural result of my associating sustenance with sickness. My suicidal history has made me a prisoner of the mental health juggernaut. If I don't make it to my appointments, the police come and get me. I can be flung into the hospital and held there indefinitely on the flimsiest pretense, or no pretense at all, by the order of doctors who only know me as swollen case-file. So I suppose I can see that if I had a thousand dollars with which to purchase myself a companion with the potential of making my remaining time on earth more bearable, I would have every reason to expect that the creature answer to a few reasonable requirements. Only a simpering nitwit would pay that much money for a worm-eaten cur. As to its sex, your arguments regarding the aversion you have to other females makes an unlikely amount of sense. If I were to order a blonde wife from Chechnya and the agency sent me a bald, rheumatic muleskinner named Boris, I don't suppose I'd be pleased. My mule even less so.

The more you tell me about this unremembered episode involving my “fallout” with Dot at her mother's house, the stranger it becomes. Now it seems that it may not have even been Sharon herself that saw me kissing a teenage girl who was obviously not her sister, but a friend of Sharon's who thought she *may* have seen me engaging in this epic perversity. Beyond the highly tenuous quality this second-hand report already contains, the fact is that I never, ever went to bars or clubs before getting my second degree at New Paltz, which was after Dot and I were already divorced. And even if this weren't the case, they don't allow seventeen year-olds in

drinking establishments, which means that whoever I—or this person mistaken for me—was trading amours with, she couldn't have been the age attributed to her. Perhaps the reason I have no memory of this entire escapade is that I have no actual transgression with which to identify it, which means that I would have been so surprised and bewildered by the accusation that my brain may have rejected it positively as non-information—a flagrant fiction to which I could attach no personal significance, outside of the job it did upsetting my wife. The only thing that lends it the slightest credibility is that I did, in all truth, kiss many young women of various ages over the duration of my relationship with Dot, so it wouldn't exactly be out of character for me. But I remember the faces of every girl I kissed, most of their names, and where it was I could be found kissing them. My wife knew nothing of these relatively trivial digressions, and even though they passed without incident or consequence, my mind retains them vividly. What could make this one, among them all, go mysteriously missing, despite the stir it caused, is utterly beyond my powers of reckoning or conjecture. All that's really incontrovertibly established by any of this is how much naked malice Sharon had for me, and how little consideration she had for her younger sister. It bears recollection that I lived, with Dot, under the same roof as Sharon and her odious, invertebrate husband, and what had heretofore remained of my self-respect has never been recovered. That family murdered me. They tortured me, they mocked me, they pulverized my spirit, and then they murdered me, after the fashion of *Julius Caesar*. I think that if Sharon weren't a vegetarian, she would have cannibalized her offspring.

There is much excellent sense in your proposal that I use my portion of the legacy, if it truly exists, to do something that “makes me feel really good.” I've spent my whole life in an

uninterrupted state of listless ennui and suffocating despair, without ever feeling that I had the right to look after my own happiness, or to divert myself in any way that wasn't blatantly self-destructive. I don't actually smoke cigarettes, as a rule, but I still find myself some nights making cigarettes and lighting them, just so I can put them out on my arm. This is entertainment for me. Normal people at least have the intelligence to put their cigarettes out on their stepchildren. Hating myself as I do, I have always supposed that if I were to make any effort to formulate a personal definition of happiness, it would have to take a form that is totally self-negating. Not merely self-abusive, like hiring a geriatric dominatrix, but self-negating, like hiring a mobster to drag me to a scrapyard and shoot me three times in the face. I could probably pay somebody to do that and still have something left over to take out an obituary consisting of one word: *WHO?*

Of course scenarios for making use of the money not resulting in my instantaneous decease have crossed my mind. I have always dreamed, for instance, of following the model of St. Anthony and the Desert Fathers, setting myself up in a cave or a tiny hut someplace miles away from any neighbor, living off of wild cabbage and rainwater. Upon reflection, however, that's actually not too different from the way I'm already living. I had considered writing my own bible, like *The Book of Mormon* or *Dianetics*, having it printed on a grand scale, then paying homeless adolescent meth addicts to put on robes and hand out copies on the streets. But there's always the rogue chance that the thing could actually catch on, leading to all manner of unforeseeable complications for me and the people who somehow find the book persuasive: a prospect I might have once thought compelling, but now find tedious. There are a million-and-a-half different

charities for as many different causes, but the charities come and go, and the causes all remain. When my aunt said, “This could be an opportunity for you,” I don't think she really understood how little that means to somebody like me. When you're raised around money, you get an instinct for making more of it, an automatic eye for the main chance. When you're raised in the dirt, as I was, money is something that you almost never have, and is always pilfered away from you by somebody who knows how to use it. How should somebody of my socio-economic station interpret the word “opportunity?” Does it mean, “Buy more lottery tickets?” Does it mean, “Hire a prostitute with a full set of dentures?” Does it mean, “Put away your master's degree and take a certification course in something bloody useful?” I have a bigger vocabulary than most people since Milton, but the word “opportunity” doesn't enter into it. I'd have to pay a rich person to tell me what it means.

I wish there were anything I wanted as badly as you want your “perfect puppy.” I wish I were as certain of anything as you are of wanting that possibly nonexistent dog. If this money is real, I could conceivably get a slightly larger place, a studio maybe, and then a cat or two, and that wouldn't be so awful. It's a pleasant idea, but it's hardly a reason to live. If anything, it would keep me living against my will for longer, because I'd have to worry about what would become of my cats if I died. That's not a meaningful existence; it's self-blackmail. I've almost always had cats, and I miss them all terribly, but never—even at my lowest ebb—did the presence of a cat make the difference between wanting to live and wanting to die. The last cat I ever personally owned was named Sam. I had to leave him behind when my brother evicted me from his basement, where I'd been staying. As soon as I was gone, Sam crawled into the walls and stayed

there for weeks, before creeping out again and passing away without a sound. I remembered him with this epitaph:

BELATED LINES FOR A BURIED CAT

A “little life” we sometimes called you, for
 Your time, compared to ours, was short, and yet
 Your days were long—and in that meager space
 That spanned our first acquaintance and your death,
 Your bore me (fingers tangled in your fur)
 Through, God! How many perishings? When I,
 The only mourner in my train, and you,
 The only watcher at my wake, we two
 Were all-in-all: twin satellites of woe,
 Revolving—as calamity ordained—
 About a coal-black mass of ironies
 Still undefined. And not for nothing, Sam,
 You took no more companions after me;
 And when I left, you taught me how to die.

Once or twice a month, on average, I'll find a frigid little mouse somewhere in my room, lying on its side in the spot where it breathed its last. One of them found its way into my box fan and got chopped up by the blade, making a massive *thunk* that made me jump out of bed. I generally put them on an outspread paper towel and look at them for a while, thinking thoughts sad and ineffable, then I wrap them up and carry them to the busy little brook by Malcolm X Park, where I watch them slide into the water and tumble away, past the submerged tires and two-pint beer cans in paper bags. Later, after dark, another mouse will come out and run its agile laps around the rim of my waste basket, looking exactly like the one I just sent to rest, and in my mind, it's all the same mouse, infinitely resurrected by the powers of the night. When I'm dead, my white-haired landlord will come and splash some paint around my room, and sweep away the mouse droppings, and let the room out to someone else, who'll be just as dejected as I am to pay so much for a ten-foot rectangle with a view of a stoplight and a basketball court. He'll sit on the end of the bed as I do, watching the same tiny television, as a spot on the wall blinks green, yellow, red, and back to green, and the same barking beat throbs out from every car that passes. And when the mouse comes out to look at the new tenant from the rim of the waste basket, it'll think that he's exactly like the last one, and maybe he's a revenant, imprisoned forever by the night.

#

Once again, I have no memory at all of the scene you describe. Sometimes I wonder if you're writing about someone else. Dot and I only ever lived in one apartment, in the Fairview Estates,

in Kingston, from 2004-2006. Before that we rented a ranch house in Mt. Marion, before that we lived in Saugerties at her sister's house, and before that in a cabin in Phoenicia. While we were living in the apartment, my first wife wanted me to take full custody of Haley, so we bought the house on Howland Ave., which was the last place we had together. It sounds like you're describing the apartment in Kingston, but I don't remember you ever visiting there. I only remember you visiting the Mt. Marion house.

This business of an attempted *menage a trois* is too bizarre to countenance. Such amorous extravagances were utterly foreign to Dot, whose idea of love was stolidly utilitarian and unimaginative, and I myself never allowed such deviations to intrude upon the sanctum of marriage. If I was stroking your arm as you say, it was most likely because I was concerned that Dot's shockingly inhospitable deportment was causing you discomfort, and I wanted to put you at ease. It is a perverse society that interprets every human touch as a prelude to depravity.

I don't ever want to talk about Dot again. I may have to write a book about her sometime, but outside of that, I'd like to forget all about her. It seems like I've already forgotten a lot. I'm sickened beyond words that, to some people who knew me between 2002 and 2008, all I'll ever be is "Dot's ex-husband." I was a *person* back then, regardless of whom I was legally attached to; I was an individual. I was not a satellite of that absurd woman, I was not an accessory. It was just that I allowed her to go about her business while she did everything she could to keep me from going about mine.

It may be that you have memories of Dot that you think for some vague sentimental reason are worth preserving. I can take every one of them and show you that they are optical illusions and perpetrations of artifice. Dot was the greatest liar on earth because she believed herself wholeheartedly to be incapable of deceit. It made me sad and ill to see Dot lying and dissimulating every conscious moment of her life and having not the faintest conception she was doing it. You find this all the time with people who are attracted to the theater. They're so addicted to lying, they have to get up on a stage to feel like they're telling some kind of truth. A truth they couldn't have thought up for themselves.

This world is lousy with Dots. It's like an outbreak of smallpox. They're educating our children, running our community theaters and our charitable societies, marching in our protests, keeping stupid first-world dietary fads alive. They think that professing convictions is the same as owning the truth; they think that belief is a weakness in everyone but themselves. They put *Das Kapital* and *Atlas Shrugged* on the same shelf and can't explain the difference between them. They make no distinction between skinny-dipping and progressive politics. They'll sleep with anything and call it egalitarianism.

If Dot knew that I was one-tenth of the degenerate she accused me of being, she would have shown me some actual respect.

#

I'm seeing my therapist today, too. I've broken my last couple of appointments with him out of apathy and resentment, so it promises to be a tense session. It's not that I dislike my therapist, as such, it's only that he's an underqualified dullard--not even a real psychologist (whatever that amounts to)--and he takes an excessively casual sort of "bro-ish" attitude toward me that indicates that he's trying to meet me on a level where I have no need or desire to be met. You don't go through ten years of college without learning how to thoroughly despise and distrust the company of "bros." He spends the whole half-hour we have together typing some imbecilic distortion of everything I say into one of his two computers, because he sees twenty people a day and has to report on all of them, especially the "high-risk" patients like me, just in case his superiors decide they want to have me arrested for being less than perfectly ecstatic. It doesn't help that I've been unmedicated for the last two months, because I felt an instant repugnance for the doctor they had me see, and felt obliged to tell him that I wouldn't let him prescribe me anything that wasn't highly narcotic and potentially lethal. He, in turn, accused me of being drunk (even though I had just left my therapist's office) and pointed me to the door.

I had been telling my therapist about the inheritance of which my brother had recently informed me. I said that it only made my life more complicated and made me think about dying more than ever, if such a thing were possible. As a "bro," and probably not an excessively well-paid one, my therapist could think of all sorts of things he would want to do with that much money. He endeavored to coax me into compiling a mental "wish-list" of things that were previously beyond my grasp, things that could "make me happy." With extreme difficulty I sought to explain to him that the money, if it existed, was wasted on me, precisely because there was nothing that

could make me happy, if I had the wealth of an Edwardian robber baron. All I could do is blither it away on empty trifles that would collect on the hilt of the knife in my soul and bury the blade even deeper. Not for the first time, my therapist let his close-cropped head fall and enfolded his face in his hands. After a weighty silence he looked back up at me and said, weakly, "We're not giving up, Damien." All I could do was smile unconvincingly. "It takes courage to admit defeat," I said.

Yesterday, since I only paid half of my rent, I took a bus out to the fringes of the city and went to an actual supermarket. I bought a roasted chicken that I could put in the refrigerator (which works some of the time) and pick at whenever inclined. I bought some bagged salads with lettuce, carrots, and little shreds of radishes. I bought a wedge of soft brie cheese, which my vegan ex-wife only let me eat once a year. I bought some cooked shrimp and, at the plaza's liquor store, a large bottle of inexpensive whiskey--companion of my youth, before poverty drove me to vodka and beer. The shrimp and the whiskey reminded me of my late great-uncle, the source of the legacy I'm predicted to receive, whose towering, prepossessing frame I always picture by my aunt's massive New England hearth, his laughter shaking the Christmas tinsel while the ice cubes scuffled in his never-absent scotch-glass. I was operating according to blind automation, somatically gathering the ingredients of what could only be my Last Meal, everything I could desire on the eve of my execution. It took me no time at all. With most of an hour left before the next bus, I crossed the highway to Barnes & Noble--the store that pirated my first book and put it up for sale online, though I had already made it publicly available for free--the store that closed the coffin on the independent book-trade, then dug up its grave and put

a stake through its heart--and, without looking around for very long, I bought a discounted edition of Shakespeare's complete plays, without notes or commentaries, closely resembling the contents and typesetting of the 1623 First Folio, beginning with Ben Johnson's epigraph. I sat down in the cafe area and started reading at the top of the first page, Part One of *King Henry VI*, which I love because it features Joan of Arc--the Maid of Orleans--the archetypal prefiguration of the saint I would one day marry, and another day divorce, discarding the silver fragments of my fleur-de-lis-shaped ring. The first miracle Joan performs is identifying the Dauphin Charles in a crowd, having never seen him before. Like my wife, she knew him for what he was. Then she smites him in a sword-fight, and the poor lad is smitten, proclaiming her the savior of France. At the bus-stop a tattoo-laden blonde dashed up to me, tottering in her ill-selected sandals and waving a bag of newly-purchased clothing. "Are you waiting for the bus back to Poughkeepsie?" she huffed as she approached, "What time is it coming?" "1:45," I said, "Or thereabouts." She glanced at her phone, which would have told her it was 1:45 exactly. "Let's hope we didn't miss it," she said breathlessly. "Well, if we miss it," I responded, "we miss it together. There's a consolation for you." Still preoccupied with her phone, the tattooed girl chuckled. "Nobody wants to be alone," she murmured. After that, we didn't speak.

Since coming to Poughkeepsie, I have thought often of how much I miss the harping of the crickets at night. There is nothing in the world less consoling to the spirit than the blunt splash of tires on the road beneath one's window, the lamenting of ambulance sirens, the sharp cries of children tracing barefooted circles in the dark. In the room where I die, in a badly-lit motor lodge someplace unmarked and nameless, I will open the window to let the mildew breathe in

the curtains and the sheets, and I will listen to the crickets, sawing their monotonous symphony for their unseen and identical mates. On the edge of the bed, with my blade and my bottle, I will think back to seventeen, when I first composed this death for myself, and how I had known already what I wanted for the last album I would ever record, the epilogue to which my death would be the appendix. It would be the same chord--possibly F minor--played continuously as a drone for twenty minutes, with no rests or gaps, topped in intervals with the most godless, hopeless, despairing and desolate words ever written by anyone on earth. Actually just five words. "Fuck it. Fuck it all." I'd have the album released exclusively to vinyl, to make it collectible, and I'd package it in a sleeve of plain, brown cardboard, with no distinguishing marks. But when the record was removed, it would have the customary label, and on this, in small block letters just above the hole, would be the name of the album, my last words to the world. "Fuck it. Fuck it all." Around and around it would go on the turnstyle. But would anyone listen to the end?

I couldn't leave New York in any permanent way for at least another two years, when my daughter turns eighteen. I have to give her at least until then to decide whether I'm worth knowing or not, and to help her organize her affairs for whatever future she designs for herself. Of course, I could still kill myself before then, but that's not the same as moving away. Moving away sends a completely different message; it says, "I still want to live, just not with you." I've always lived close to my daughter because I wanted her to know that, even if died, I would never leave her behind. Even if I weren't there to give her away in marriage, I would be there always to welcome her in death.

So saying, I have thought many times of concluding my days as a migrant farm-worker, like something out of a Steinbeck novel, following the harvest from state to state and sleeping in a shed with forty other men dreaming dreams of Ecuador, where the rain tastes like a girl's arched neck, and the flowers' lips are painted. When I was very young, my family lived briefly in a farmhouse by a large and thriving orchard. We lived there for two seasons, and the first season, the trees were thick with migrant workers of half-a-dozen hues; all was picked clean and bashful with prosperity. The next season, some regulation or another took effect, and what workers remained available straggled in like they were riding the last two cars of a catastrophic train-wreck. The air was so permeated with fermenting apples, peaches, and pears, that the wasps and hornets gathered in clouds and blocked the light from the windows. On the greyest of days, when the lightning sizzled and snapped over the purple-crested peaks, my mother would go with a basket and scavenge through the carnage of the unattended trees, picking up the offal of an orchard doffed of men. From this clandestine rapine would come preserves and pies and cobblers, while apple-cores and peach-pits made a mountain of our compost and a kingdom of our cornfield. And on the porch, shucking pea-pods, with comic books on our laps, my brother and I would hunch over our buckets and, squinting at the pages in the pink, retreating light, turn up our ears at the crickets--all those crickets flatly pleading for their unknown, nameless mates.

#

The married woman I was seeing since the beginning of the year--the one I met while getting my electroshock treatments, whose husband is a substance abuse counselor--started writing to me again yesterday. You tell me you're living in a nightmare, and I know exactly what you mean, though my nightmare consists not of an atmosphere of chemicals, but of secrets. As much as I thought that I loved this woman, it was a great relief when her husband discovered our affair, and everything came to what I believed would be a permanent surcease. It was such a pathetic masquerade, being the "other man" for the first time, after putting so many women in the same humiliating position. To my astonishment, I felt legitimately guilty about it; not because she was married, but because the whole nature of our relationship was so ridiculous and debasing. We were two middle-aged adults making secret assignations like teenagers slipping out of their bedroom windows. It was the stuff of badly written soap operas, only without the glamour. Now she's writing to me again, and she wants to talk to me on Monday--calling me secretly from her job, of course. I tried to scare her away, to play the discarded lover, wounded and righteous. But I'm too nice to keep that sort of thing up for long. It's starting all over again and I just want to run away, to leave it in the past, along with everything and everyone else.

I wish I weren't so tired. I'd like to write more tonight, to keep you company, so to speak. But I've spent the whole day, since before sunrise this morning, reading the spiritual writings of Leo Tolstoy and thinking about whether I should take a complete left turn in life and commit myself to helping my brother achieve his dream of starting a church. Just because everything I ever wanted lies in twisted ruins doesn't mean he should spend his life in disappointment like our father.

I know it's nothing like reading an actual letter, but if you go to [my website] you can read everything from memoir, to poetry, to fiction. There are even two audiobooks on there, so you can hear my voice. I spend a lot of time listening to strangers reading books out loud, and I find it to be a far less lonesome pastime than watching television or listening to music. That's how people used to entertain each other in the evenings before radio came along: reading to each other by the fireside. A few of the books on my website contain material written during my last marriage, so maybe you can learn something titillating or horrifying or just plain disgusting, straight from the horse's mouth, as it were.

Oh, and there's nothing legally preventing me from leaving the state. I just don't have a car and my license is expired. I haven't made up my mind whether I want to buy a car, if this money ever comes. I've been in a lot of accidents and I'm prone to having panic attacks while driving. It's been two years since I've driven and I haven't missed it at all.

###

Nearly everybody on earth would tell you that I've been making it too easy for you to talk about suicide--that I've been facilitating and encouraging a line of thought that is generally considered unthinkable. Camus surely had this in mind when he undertook the writing of *The Myth of Sisyphus*: everything is permissible in philosophical discourse except for the one thing that actually merits and requires immediate investigation and immediate conclusion. The original

syllogism is thus: "All men will die; Socrates is a man; *ergo* Socrates will die." To this every intelligent person will add the query, "Why should Socrates not die now?" If there is no question of the prey not being caught eventually, why should it prolong the weariness and terror by continuing to run? Why let death hold you on a tether when it is in your power to cut the tether and take the crown for yourself? Anyone who does not wish to embarrass himself will tell you that he has accepted the fact of his own death--just not yet. He's like a child whose supper is finished, and who has watched an hour of television, and who has brushed his teeth and donned his pajamas and checked that his closet is closed, and yet refuses to go to bed. The hour on the clock, the moon in the sky, the tempestuous shadows in his parents' eyes all inform him that it is time for sleep, but the day must not be over, because the child is afraid, though he knows not what he fears. Before parents stopped believing that their children had souls, they used to instruct them to pray before snuffing the light, on the chance that morning would find their little shapes rigid and unoccupied. "Pray without ceasing," says the Gospel, "No man knows the day or the hour of the coming of the Lord." The Rule of St. Benedict enjoins its adherents to hold the face of Death always before them. But what prevents us from reaching out to that which is already reaching out for us? What satisfaction can we get from tomorrow's breakfast that we have not already gotten from tonight's dessert? We work all day with the hope of gentle slumber, and yet, though our labors are hateful to us and our slumber is sweet, we pray for our sleep to be broken and our labors renewed. We speak of death as being a tyrant, even while life lacerates us with its whip and chokes us with its chains. And yet it is the suicide who is slandered as irrational! Being the most reasonable of all thoughts, it is of this one alone that we

must never speak. But I say that if there were no tyrants, there would be no traitors. "Let all who have ears hear."

What you seem to be telling me is that Mike tried to extort his father for the cost of an obviously lavish and luxurious rehabilitation program, and being refused, protested the refusal by dying. You already informed me that Mike was spending \$125,000 a year on heroin. What could his father then have expected from \$50,000 worth of group therapy and methadone? The third of the month was always a signal day in the many rehabs I've been to; a day of attrition. On the third of the month all of the alcoholics and crack addicts collect their government benefits, myself included, and dismiss themselves en masse from their programs to resume their habits with a vigor sharpened by awful sobriety. They coasted into rehab at the rear end of their last high or buzz, knowing that they were out of money, and wanting a comfortable place to sleep and get fed until their reason for living was restored to them again. Everybody gains thirty or forty pounds in rehab, knowing that they'll return to their skeletal selves when they inevitably go back to the chemical diets that give their lives the purpose and substance that they would otherwise lack. Tender hearts tell us that war is purposeless destruction, but war-mongers know that men and nations are aimless and miserable without it. Smug evangelists tell us that drugs and alcohol bring nothing but pain and ruin, but we compatriots in suffering know that there is no more pernicious addiction than that which we have to life itself. They kick us on the street, call us lazy, useless parasites, but nobody works harder than an addict, nobody strives more tirelessly for a life that society scorns as indefensible. We're working for the same thing as everybody else: the right to go to sleep.

I don't think I've ever heard you say anything as perspicacious and adroit as what you've just told me about this woman, my former mistress, of whom I've told you nothing before. "She has no keys to unlock [my] questions or thoughts." She and I were never anything but partners in flattery. I flattered her by being young and eloquent, dark-minded and mysterious, and she flattered me by taking on the perils of adultery for my sake, extolling me for my brilliance, though nearly everything I ever said went breezing past her like a retrofitted hummingbird. I couldn't admit how much more loving her made me hate myself. I was like a plastic trophy that she kept in a cupboard, a prize she did nothing to win. No, I won't talk to her today, or ever again. I may be the world champion of purblind back-peddlers, but I'm having too good a time burning craters into my arm to require any further self-punishment. It would be the quintessential betrayal of everything we hope for from love.

I called my brother yesterday and told him everything I've been thinking about. I told him that I've never shown myself capable of intelligently directing my own life; that my whole, cataclysmic strategy has been to petulantly defy the directions proposed to me by others. Like a pathetic, furious little bee, I have eviscerated myself for a chance at lodging a microscopic stinger in the infinite breast of God. I've been a kamikaze pilot for an Emperor in exile--a crusader for the sunset, knowing no trajectory but down. When my brother first told me what I had always thought he was too smart and too humble to say, that he wanted to start his own church, my first impulse was to pity him for consciously adopting a farcical legacy that could lead to nothing but discomfiture and disillusionment. "There are empty churches on every street

in the country," I droned, "Let them be filled first and then start your own." Incredibly, he did not allow himself to be baited; he offered no contradiction. And while he took on what amounted to a second career immersing himself in church history, the principles and origins of orthodoxy, he let me come around in my own time to the most obvious of all questions: "*Why* do the churches stand empty? Where are the people turning now for sanctuary, community, identity and truth? The strength and authority of the Church has evaporated, but where has it gone, to what has it been transferred? Or has it simply been divided and dispersed beyond recognition? Are the people truly godless, or are they just bewildered, studying the sky but unable to discern by which star to navigate?" These are the questions asked by John the Baptist, by Mohamed, by the Protestant reformers, the millennialist reactionaries, the utopian separatists, by Joseph Smith, and Mary Baker Eddy, and the Millerites who turned universal despair into independent dogma when the world failed to end in 1844, by the Witnesses and the Salvationists, the Rosicrucians and the Theosophists, the builders of temples in Boston and Baltimore and backwaters everywhere, temples to bombast and ballyhoo, physical testaments to the *possibility* of a Truth submerged in prehistory and laid bare by the bonfires of controversy, heresy burning heresy, the immortal clashing of incompatible absolutes. Quietly, soberly, with fear and trembling, my brother has been gagging with me on the same sense of swallowed rage, muffled for a century by the velvet-bound goose-down of toleration, ecumenicalism, and iconoclastic indifference that has disarmed the defender and made a doormat of the Cross. The ubiquitous relaxation of contention and convention within Christendom has turned the whole field into a madcap pie-fight, where everybody gets hit, nobody gets hurt, and we all end up looking like the same ludicrous self-parodies of faceless, flavorless white. I've spent my whole life dreaming of starting a new

religion on the pretext that no legitimate religions exist anymore, but continuously foiled by the recurrent realization that I can invent nothing superior to Christianity. My brother has spent his whole life trusting that nothing surpasses the legitimacy of Christianity, but, looking everywhere, finding no expression of Christianity that considers its own legitimacy worth fighting for. We are both struggling to make a place for ourselves in a world where our imperative is martyrdom, but our death-pit is a punchline, and the joke is the uncontested and universally-affirmed axiom that our lives are only measurable by personal success, the setting and accomplishment of completely selfish, unimportant and evanescent goals.

#

I hope you got some sleep. I was able to fall asleep a few times, for a few minutes each time, but my dreams were so aggressively disturbing that no amount of actual rest was gained by it. I always wake up more exhausted than I was on lying down.

In general, I prefer living in old buildings with dubious histories, as I have more in common with ghosts than I have with living people. But your tiny house idea holds a lot of allure for me.

We've both spent our whole lives moving, always moving. What must it be like to belong to just one place--during life and after it? It reminds me of a lyric from one of my albums, *In Love with Death*. "It's all I've ever wanted: to haunt and not be haunted."

It gave me great pleasure to hear of your trip to Nederland. "Black birds eating black berries in purple trees" was perhaps the most beautiful thing you've ever spoken of. It may have been the

only beautiful thing you've spoken of, other than yourself. Poetry is everywhere once you learn how to look for it.

The married woman continues to write to me, painting lurid pictures of how she misses my body, my voice, etc. Every time I think of her, I want to do something unspeakable to myself--gouge my eyes out, peel my own skin off, set myself on fire. My walls were covered in pictures I've painted and drawn, but yesterday I tore every last one of them down, wiping away the silhouettes of dust that had come to frame them. I couldn't stand to look at anything that reminded me of myself. Now the walls are blank and I feel naked in front of the ghosts who were there so long before me, wondering why I came and why they can't leave.

I'm excited to hear your thoughts on religion. The last time we talked about anything like that was when we were so young that we were barely even born yet. Have we been born yet? Sometimes I wonder.

#

That question, "Why will you wake up tomorrow," puts me in mind of the Buddhist concept of Samsara, eternal cyclicalality and rebirth, the inescapable nature of suffering to which all unenlightened beings remain eternally subject. Each day is its own savage little microcosm of this all-enveloping system, this pantomime of futility, whereby we awaken every morning thinking of nothing but making it to the night, and confront every night thinking of nothing but

making it to the morning. In the day we desire only rest; in the night we fear that our rest will be complete and irrevocable, that we will never return from it, though each return presents nothing to us but a resumption of suffering, struggle, and discontent. This is the embarrassment of being: endless repetition leading to illimitable disappointment. Every new achievement only reveals previously unrealized opportunities for despair. Despair, I have often concluded, is the true face of existence, and it mocks without mercy our illusions of achievement. And yet I woke up this morning (after my customary hour of uneasy sleep), washed myself contemptuously in the murky predawn, read your email, and began contemplating a response, knowing in advance that it could contain nothing novel, innovative, or illuminating--nothing uplifting, redemptive, or incontestably good. I have spent my life in nervous, half-crazed pursuit of words and ideas that were in some way useful, that could be put to some identifiable purpose, that could signify a truth by which my own reality, substance, and basis for being could be justified and confirmed. Never secure within my own body, my inherited and intuited identity, my era or society--instinctively distrusting and disdaining everything base and material--I have searched without respite for a home made of words. A spider spins its diaphanous domicile without art or instruction, and it catches its dinner, and it eats. I sit spinning my words into uninhabitable edifices of casuistic irrelevancies and starve amidst the wreckage, neither warmed, nor sheltered, nor pleased, nor edified by my folly--my monument--my "achievement." Even *despair* is only a word alluding to but not explaining the totality of the emptiness I am.

Something I began doing out of frustration and idleness has turned into a gruesome kind of mania. Early last week, or sometime not far from that, I rolled myself a cigarette for the first

time in many months, and, rather than dousing it in an ashtray, I somewhat absently smothered it on my wrist, slowly and with a mirthless sense of relish. I don't enjoy cigarettes; the look and the smell of them calls to my vision everything ugly, contemptible, and low. I suppose I must have thought, as I was smoking this one, that something good or somehow memorable must come of this detested act, and by burying its embers in my flesh, I earned a reminder of my own inestimable wretchedness. When the butt ceased smoldering, I peeled it away from my arm and stuffed it in the ashtray, blowing off the cinders and examining the damage done with rueful satisfaction. I had no intention then of repeating what seemed to me then a discrete and undignified act. Ten minutes had not passed, however, before a pervasive and overpowering agitation took hold of me once more, forcing me to my feet with my legs quivering beneath me. Frightened and becoming desperate, I filled another cigarette, lit it unsteadily, and did as I had done before, selecting where I would place the wound with eerie deliberation. So it went for days--the paroxysms of panic, the vile cigarette, the warping and melting and seething of skin--until I began to search in vain for empty areas to attack. The product, after a week of this, was--and is--hideous beyond words. My wrist is like a nuclear wasteland of scorched pocks surrounded by red patches of angry, withered tissue. Unlike my other scars, over and around which these new ravages are strategically but unevenly arranged, the cigarette burns are unaesthetic and even revolting, like leprosy or scrofula. Although the initial sting brings momentary discomfort, the real anguish doesn't start until the wound tries to heal; then a bulging yellow blister forms, which, when perforated, collapses into a scabrous layer that's impossible not to scratch and pick at, bringing unctuous secretion and redoubled pain. A voice keeps on cajoling me to leave my wrist alone and start scorching my face and forehead instead, but this

voice is familiar to me, and all it wants is for me to become such an object of horror and loathing that I'll have no choice but to plunge a razor in my own gullet.

It doesn't end there. I've been relegating the burns to my right arm because there are already scars on my left wrist that are of particular value to me, and merit preservation. The best is a gash some three inches long that required twenty-five stitches, and bears record to the day that I tried to bleed to death and drown simultaneously, throwing myself into the Wallkill Creek after slashing my veins in a New Paltz hotel room. Beneath that is a variously-shaded multilayered grid of smaller incisions collected over a decade of sanguinary exploits. Last night, however, while half-watching a shallow and uninformative documentary on Buddhism, I was compelled to tear a sheet of paper out of a sketchpad, carve three new openings in my left wrist, and use the blood to paint a primitive cross, which I posted over my bed on the southern wall of my room. After ripping all my art-work down a couple of days ago, I've had nothing on my walls except for a few religious icons and my master's degree. I looked at the coagulating blood-cross for a while, not quite sure that I was comfortable with what I had done, but eventually feeling vaguely sanctified by this compulsive expression of pious sentiment--if not actual conviction. It does make me wonder, though, if I'm not becoming a little unhinged. Most of the craziest people I've encountered in hospitals and elsewhere have exhibited a prominent religious streak, augmenting their already fractured reality with some utterly specious interpretation of ecclesiastical lore. In some places, mental invalids are regarded as the favorite children of God, being too stupid to give place to skepticism. Dot's uncle, who had Down Syndrome and the intellect of a toddler, cared for only two things in life: sailboats and images of the Virgin. When given a toy boat, he

would squeal with joy, but when shown a picture of Our Lady, tears would gather in his eyes, and he would bow and cross himself convulsively, dribbling inarticulate prayers until somebody came and held him still. I observed this a few times with irrepressible emotion. How could anyone so innocent be related to Dot?

It's not your fault, of course, but I wish that you had taken me aside before I let things get serious with Dot and asked me what the hell I thought I was doing. You already knew that I was looking for something that she didn't have the soul or the depth to possess, but you were devoted to her and uncertain of yourself, and I was too intoxicated by my undreamt-of triumph to examine it under the light and see that it was counterfeit. By the time of the wedding, I had already been completely relieved of the hope or aspiration that either of us could ever make the other happy, but I didn't have the courage to tell her that her choice of husband was catastrophic and obscene. Who was I to contradict tradition? Almost every woman who has ever had her own will in the matter has made a choice of husbands that was catastrophic and obscene. You'd think that after ten millennia of advanced civilization we would have learned how to distinguish the laws of domestic functionality from the gladiatorial bloodbath of libidinal attraction. How many times have we heard of some otherwise reasonable and self-reliant woman getting married *in absentia* to a swastika-plastered convict sentenced to life for rape and murder? Let the books of jurisprudence be opened and amended: between murder and marriage there exists no distinction.

###

This morning, as he does at least once every day, my brother treated me to another Franklinesque dissertation about how it is he managed to put his life in such excellent order and become so trustworthy and responsible a person. His secret--which is the same "secret" professed by nearly every other person on earth, or at least in America--is work. As long as one has work to do, one has no reason to be unhappy. He insists upon this even though he dislikes his job and considers giving it up every day, to return to freelancing. But freelancing was what he was doing before. He found it frustrating, insecure, and unequal to his financial needs. His other "secret," of course, is family. As long as one has a family whose happiness is one's main concern, one's own happiness ought never to come into consideration. Growing up, however, we were subjected daily to the reality that our father's unhappiness brought misery upon the whole family; it was an inescapable pall that enshrouded everything and made life intolerable. Finally, his third and ultimate "secret" is God and the religion that permeates and infuses every aspect of his personal, familial, and social life. In this respect he and his wife are the mirror images of our own parents, for whom no reality existed outside of religious belief and practice, while my brother's ambition to start his own church is the same as my father's, and at present seems equally hopeless. And I ask myself every day as I receive this lecture anew: if these are the "secrets" by which he has achieved success and happiness, why were our parents so unhappy and unsuccessful? How can I trust his model to be infallible, when our childhoods prove that they can go so incredibly wrong?

You say that, contrary to my previous assertions, I actually have quite a strong will to live. Yet when you speak of how you would like to end your days, you give every appearance of knowing exactly what you want, and exactly what will make you happy. There is nothing "glaringly

abnormal" about wanting to surf, run, bike, hike, play volleyball, and eat good food. These are all things that millions upon millions of utterly normal, perfectly adjusted, reasonably contented and fulfilled people enjoy, whether or not they like their jobs or get along with their families. You can list six things that would bring you some degree of satisfaction in life; I can't even list one.

The point that you seem to return to again and again is the loathing you have for your job. It really seems to be the only thing standing in the way of your beginning to find peace and relevance in your life. Of course, a career is a terribly pervasive and consuming aspect of one's life, if one is fortunate enough to *have* a career--which many of us aren't. For the rest of us--the restless, the incapable, the uneducated, the displaced--every day is a career unto itself: a savage and grimy struggle against starvation, exposure, and soul-squashing indolence. If, however, you have spent all of your life working up to the career that you have now, and realized at the end of it that it can bring you no closer to happiness or a sense of self-worth, what can you do? The situation is particularly dire if even this career, which should mean everything to you but doesn't, is held precariously in the hands of others to whom you are, in the final scheme, only of the most conditional and impermanent value.

It may be that my brother is right about everything. In the eyes of the world, he certainly holds the moral and logical upper hand, and it is clear that--for all of Jesus' injunctions against holding others in judgment or contempt--he sees no incongruity in treating me with the most withering condescension. I can only wonder what he would say to you.

#

I should be writing to you a lot more. One thing Kingston has that Poughkeepsie doesn't is graveyards--several large, solitary graveyards all scattered within a couple miles of each other. Since I've gotten here, I've been spending nearly all day, every day, going from one cemetery to another, sitting for hours upon hours under some secluded sepulcher, reading or just staring out at the graves, and thinking, thinking, thinking... Somehow, between all the walking, reading, and thinking, I end up being more exhausted than I would if I were actually *doing* something.

I had this preposterously naive idea that staying with my brother would renew me spiritually somehow; put me on the path of rediscovering my lost sense of connection to the Divine. The opposite has occurred. Every morning I come downstairs to my brother and his wife studying their Bibles together, and all I feel is excluded and annoyed. They banter with each other about controversial points of scripture--my brother declaiming with haughty authority, his wife deferring or submitting to him nearly all the time, me knowing that if I put in a word one way or another, it would be dismissed by both of them as an irrelevant intrusion. I think that my brother still assumes me to be some kind of Christian, just as my parents do; but they think me to be an ineffectual and dishonest Christian, a wolf in sheep's clothing. I can't blame them. Look at my life. Look at me!

I had no idea your legal difficulties were so serious. Six years' probation seems like a long time. I have a misdemeanor myself, for driving while intoxicated, but I was luckily able to avoid

probation. It hasn't seriously impaired my life so far--not the way, say, a drug charge would.

Does going to trial mean you're going to plead your innocence?

There don't seem to be many rental opportunities in Kingston that I can afford. I answered an advertisement for a roommate yesterday, but who can say whether I'll hear back or not. Every minute I spend at my brother's house I feel guiltier, filthier, and sicker. I feel like I've brought a pestilence upon his life, like my very presence is offensive, unholy, and accursed. If I told him the truth about this, he would say that it's because I *am* guilty, and my conscience--what's left of it--is condemning me. Being in this house, around him and his family, it's akin to a vampire being shown a mirror or a crucifix. Every moment I just want to shrink away into a corner, but everywhere I go I feel exposed, vulnerable to judgment and scrutiny. I suppose I felt that way in Poughkeepsie, too, but at least there I could lock my door and not leave for days. Now I spend the daylight hours wandering the streets, loitering at the library, haunting the graveyards like a goddamned ghoul--anything not to be at that house, pressed to death and madness by that terrible pall of guilt.

The other morning I was having a panic attack of the kind that I get from time to time, for no specific reason. I tried to explain to my brother what was happening, and excused myself from the breakfast table when I felt a seizure coming on. Later, he came up to the office and found me on the bed, curled up and shaking. Immediately he began accusing me of being weak and evil, telling me that my anxiety disorder is a result of *sin*--that it was my *sinfulness* that was causing

me to panic. Such things don't happen to good and Godly people. Good and Godly people have nothing to fear.

I just want to get out of here and resume my plans for dying.

#

I'm not the man you remember me being. The charisma, the charm, the mystery and subtle attraction--they're all gone. Now I'm nothing but withdrawn, taciturn, sucked up into myself; a shriveled homunculus of what I once was. I no longer possess the power to attract women or anybody else. All magnetism I once possessed has dried up and died away.

But here you are again, trying to convince me that I could "get married and have a normal life," despite my innumerable efforts to convince you that I desire no such thing, nor do I believe it could bring me any closer to happiness. It's true, your relationships have been exceedingly short, but so--for what they were--have mine. All right, so I had one marriage that lasted one year and another that lasted for three. What does that amount to? Marriages are supposed to last forever. If I could find happiness in marriage, don't you think I would have when I had the opportunity?

On the street in Poughkeepsie the other day I met a woman that I lived with for nearly four years. We spoke as if we barely knew each other, like something just slightly more than strangers. Indeed, that's all we were. Time accounts for nothing when people don't truly love each

other--when they're not genuinely interested in supporting each other's happiness. I know for an absolute fact that there is nothing anyone else can do for me that would make me happy, that would relieve me of the lifelong burden of sadness, sorrow, and pain that I drag behind me like a sackful of stones. How could I make anyone else happy by placing that burden on them?

I don't think our reasons for looking forward to death are as different as you say. I find myself now living entirely in my agonizing memories, with no capacity to look forward or envision anything different or better in any way. Honestly, I'm astonished at what a complete blank my mind is so much of the time; I really do feel as if I'm staring at a wall, totally unable to scale it for the sake of achieving some broader, more hopeful vantage. I want to look out and see the full vista of life spread before me the way other people do, but I can't, and I don't think I ever could. I had youth once, but that's all I had, and I don't have it anymore.

#

At the risk of sounding critical (though what is a little criticism between friends, even when the critic has perhaps greater cause for being criticized than criticizing?), your missives often bear so great—often verbatim—resemblance to each other, that from night to night, I frequently find myself sadly unable to devise alternative responses to them. As much as I would like to find new answers to your questions and declarations (“I am definitely going to kill myself,” “I may not kill myself just yet,” “I will absolutely kill myself, but not now,” “I have to die this instant but don't have the poison with which to do it,” etc. Or “Should I kill myself?” “Can you come here and

save me?” “Is it possible not to have to kill myself?” And so on...), as you probably would not be proposing such things over and over if you were finding any solace or satisfaction in the responses I have already been providing, I feel that it would be disingenuous of me to always reply in some different or potentially self-contradictory way, only for the sake of providing you with novelty. I have honestly begun to doubt that there are any answers I can provide that would relieve you of a state of perpetual inner conflict which seems contumaciously impervious to any alteration in external conditions or any attempts of assurance (however necessarily meager) that I might attempt to extend. It gets to the point where I feel I must thrust up my hands and wail, like a physician with his bagful of exhausted and impotent ministrations, *What more wouldst thou have me do?*

As much as I think that the very reason for our correspondence is that our conditions in life are fundamentally if not materially the same, I must wonder sometimes whether the solutions to our conditions—if there are any solutions, which is greatly to be doubted—would, in the end, bear any resemblance to each other. I do not believe it is the *source* of my unhappiness, as such, but I can state with verity that the primary form my unhappiness takes is that of persistent frustrated dissatisfaction with my sense of creative and intellectual unproductiveness and impotency, which consistently impedes me from either expressing or renewing myself according to my usual routes of interest and industry. In simpler terms, I can't seem to find anything that holds any riveting interest or degree of meaningful engagement for me, and I no longer seem to possess (as evidence would have that I once did, though I didn't know it then, and didn't benefit by it) the active ability to interest or engage myself in anything original or self-generated. I seem to be in

much the same state as my infant nephew, of whom, when nothing seems to appease or mollify his whimpering and struggling, it is said, “He just doesn't know what to do with himself.”

And this is of course the point my brother is always trying to make with me: the whole purpose of becoming an adult in the first place is to *find what to do with yourself*. At its center, this indeed makes our respective dilemmas very much the same. Although you have by all appearances been far more successful than I in finding what to do with yourself, none of it has brought you any lasting contentment, fulfillment, or sense of purpose. And to be sure, countless others have traveled farther down life's tedious and toilsome path than either of us, only to discover that—busy as they may have been—they have never really been *occupied* in anything that can be shown, at the last, to have been of any but the most transient and indefinite use or value. In fairness, my brother complains of this incessantly in reference to his own employment, which he despises ardently; but he is able to rectify it by throwing himself exhaustively into religion and family, in the same way that others seem to pacify themselves with less glorious pursuits such as car restoration, physical self-maintenance, collecting, or what you will. Does this make him more enlightened than any other hopelessly directionless post-industrial yob? I have no cause to conclude that it does. True, religion and family are both very ancient and venerable forms of distraction-from-the-self, but if I were to take up chiseling arrows out of flint or covering cave walls with primitive graffiti on the same pretext, would my time be just as well spent? Objectively, perhaps, but I would not have the advantage (unless I convinced myself into doing so) of being able to endow these otherwise unremunerative activities with the same quality of *ultimate and transcendent meaning* that my twin is so fortunate to have found.

We must be prepared to accept that, since the answers are evidently not to be found in life, only death will satisfy our yearning for something final, indisputable and secure.